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# Destroying Herman Yoder

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by Gregory Blake Smith

In the gun store I couldn't make up my mind. There was all that smug menace to choose from. I hefted revolvers and breech loaders, practiced executing the world with Mausers and Glocks. The store owner—his name was Ronnie—was very patient, answering my questions, overlooking my ignorance. In the end it was a Smith & Wesson snub-nosed .38 Special I settled on, swayed I suppose by the associations—fedoras, rain-slick alleys, platinum blondes and gut-shot punks. I have always been a classicist at heart, as even the Academy of American Poets recognized.

According to *The Review of Wound Ballistics*, the Glaser Safety Slug (one of which I have just discharged into a pumpkin to the right of Herman Yoder's head) has a pre-fragmented core of compressed number twelve shot. It uses an eighty grain bullet rated at +P velocity, a design that causes the slug to expend its energy into the target, without excessive penetration and the danger of collateral injury.

I say all this to Herman Yoder, standing there in his living room, even that part about the +P velocity, smiling calmly the way madmen do in the movies.

It was not easy finding him. Yoder is a common surname in Iowa. Drive through the environs of the Amana colonies and you will see it painted sloppily on

every other mailbox. I had to thumb through a dozen phone books, call this or that Yoder and impersonate lost high-school buddies, confused UPS drivers, until finally I located his house in a cornfield outside Wellman, just down the road from a wooden church on the National Historic Register, a mere eighteen miles from the high school he'd attended, twenty-two from the farm Grace Albrecht had grown up on.

"What kind of name is that anyway?" I say now, coming back from the pumpkin and plopping myself down in this sad Castro convertible. I keep the gun leveled at him.

"Yoder," he says, as if that explained something.

"Not Yoder," I say; and then like a punch line: "Herman. What kind of dick-ass name is that?"

*The Review of Wound Ballistics.* Don't you love it?

The Castro convertible isn't the only sad thing here. The whole house is sad in my considered opinion. A suburban rambler, circa 1970, an out-of-place eyesore with its pseudo-modernist horizontals, low-pitched roof, the nonsense of a lawn abutting cornfield on three sides. There's a little windmill in the front yard. Maybe five feet tall. And in the backyard a split-rail yard swing. Very rustic.

Somewhere, acres away, a harvester is running. Rolled up in my back pocket I've got my well-thumbed copy of *Action Comics* #187.

He asks for the second time who I am, and for the second time I tell him. I am Ichabod Sick, I say, which is more or less true.

"What kind of name is that?" he has the nerve to say and I smile, make a checkmark in the air to show I appreciate the bravado.

“Sick,” I say and cock the Special. “That’s what kind of name.”

Twenty years ago it had been a choice between Ichabod and Orlando, dactyl or amphibrach. I took a poll of friends and enemies. Orlando, it was felt, had a certain flair which, in my warmer moments toward myself, appealed—thick, Harlequin Romance hair, a chemise open at the throat, maybe a casement window dusted with Tuscan moonlight. Or so I described it years later to an interviewer from *The American Poetry Review*. But Ichabod had a doggy tenacity that I thought would stick by me when the going got tough. When I handed the official papers in, the Cambridge District Court secretary had grimaced.

“Sid Vicious,” she’d said. This was 1981. “Johnny Rotten. Is that the idea?”

Herman Yoder, on the other hand, looks like a Nashville reject. A blonde-streaked mullet that’s already getting on my nerves, a ripped “Achy Breaky” t-shirt, blue jeans. I caught him barefooted and about to shave, which gives him a particularly vulnerable air. It’s a pleasure to find him so easy to hate.

I tell him to sit on his hands. To put his hands under his thighs and keep them there. This was something my high school chess coach taught the chess team to do. “Think,” he used to say. “Then think some more. Don’t take your hands out until you understand the position on the board.”

“Think,” I tell Herman Yoder now. “Then think some more. Don’t take your hands out until you understand the position on the board.”

He wants to know what he’s supposed to think about.

“Crime and punishment,” I tell him.

In addition to Herman Yoder, and Ichabod Sick, and the pumpkin with a bullet in its brain, the other sad entities in Herman Yoder’s living room are a television, a couch, photos of what one surmises is Herman Yoder’s family. Tucked in between two chairs there’s a bookcase filled with diet books. Taped on the picture window, facing out, made of construction paper, are two black cats, a witch on a broomstick, and an impossibly orange moon.

On the end table beside me is the 1990 Clear Creek Amana High School Yearbook (faux-leather binding, faux-gilt lettering). I open it at the back and start paging through it. There’s a Zelinsky, and a Zeiner. And then there’s a Yoder. Three Yoders actually—Anna, Eva, and Herman. We ask the Herman in the photo if he knows that he will grow up to wear an Achy Breaky t-shirt like a capital-L loser, and then flip to the front of the book.

Aaron, Abbott, Adamczyk—you should quit now, we tell ourselves, but the pages keep turning—Adamson, Ahling, Aiken....

And then there she is, her eighteen-year-old self looking at me from off the page without reproach or shadow, in one of her cape dresses, and with a prayer veil covering her hair, and with that smile of hers, and for a moment the world shimmers again, coheres, and the urge to kill living things that has been hovering just above the Castro convertible drifts toward the open window.

The first time I saw her I was twenty-five and she was twelve. I was a hotshot in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the lithium/valproate cocktail that had gotten me through college was still working, and I was living with a girl who liked to expose her breasts to me as if they were a force of nature. Her name was Judith, and she was ironic and Jewish and thought Iowa was a hoot.

It was at the Steam Days Celebration in Kalona, where Judith and I had gone because that's what we did on weekends, attended rural Iowa as if it were a local talent show. There were restored tractors and harvesters on display, steam-powered antiquities with belts flapping and pop valves hissing. A Bingo game was being called over a PA system. We walked around and made fun of everything, ate bratwurst and roasted corn, rubbed sunscreen on each other's bare limbs. Judith had on these big sunglasses that made her look like Jackie O. And I had on a tank top because in those days I was lean and had nice arms. We turned into the main tent where pies and fresh-baked bread and handicrafts were being sold. It was Judith who spotted her.

I captured the moment beautifully in "The Atmosphere Cleaves." That sense of another world intruding on this one. A higher world depositing here as a joke or a parable—or just to rub our noses in our lame, drooling, mud-caked, manic-depressive inadequacy—a splash of clarity. She was with her mother, standing behind a card-table with a checked tablecloth flung over it, selling jars of homemade preserves and jellies, the two of them in Mennonite dress, their hair parted in the middle and swept back under a little cap, their

bodies in unflattering, homemade dresses that covered their arms and dropped to their ankles, identical Reeboks on their feet. This was nothing to me. I had gotten used to seeing Mennonite families on shopping excursions in the malls around Iowa City. But there was about this girl a lucid beauty that was blinding. Not Hollywood or *Vogue* beauty, understand. There were no flaring cheekbones. She had only as much mouth as was necessary. But her face was perfect. A beauty as bare of ornament as an equation.

“We must have intercourse,” Judith said, parting the red slash of her lips and poking me in the ribs. “We must sample her wares.”

What I remember most, and what made it into “The Atmosphere Cleaves,” was the sudden sense of my own carnality, the nakedness of my limbs, my shoulders, the bare crankshafts of Judith’s collar-bones. I saw myself, saw Judith and me, as this girl must have seen us—in our vanity, our sex unredeemed by any glimmer of love. Judith did all the talking, sampling the various jellies and preserves—plum, peach, apple butter—commenting on each and asking questions. Each time it was the mother who responded, even when Judith directed her questions at the girl, who stood there shy and overwhelmed. The only word she uttered was “Grace” when Judith—from point-blank range—asked her her name.

“Grace,” Judith repeated, and the word slithered in the grass and disappeared under the side of the tent. “And how old are you, Grace?”

“She’s twelve,” the mother said, handing me the change. She noticed my hand tremors. The lithium.

“And do you say your prayers every night?”

A glaze overspread mother and daughter. They were used to this. The sly harassment, the indirect ridicule.

“Come on,” I said, taking Judith by the arm. She smiled her Scarsdale-Vassar, we-have-to-be-going smile, and let me lead her away.

“Well, that was fun,” she said when we were back outside the tent. We watched a threshing machine clank along.

“Your tits were taking up all the oxygen.”

“My tits—” she said, appraising herself—“belong on Mt. Rushmore.”

And that would have been that. The girl would have been slimly decanted into my first book of poems, made her way into various anthologies, and that would have been an end to it. Except that six years later I saw her again. Saw her in a reprise of that first time as if reality had cribbed from my poem—the checked tablecloth, the antiquarian sunshine, the chuffing machinery in the background....

I was back at the Workshop, this time as teacher, Judith long gone, lithium/valproate succeeded by Tegretol, which was succeeded by Cibalith-S. I had been through some tough stuff, including a couple of hospitalizations, during one of which I fell in love with this anorexic girl. This was at Mass General, on a ward called Bullfinch 7 where they put the schizos and the self-harming bipolars and the teenage girls with one foot in the grave. We were quite a crew, sitting around the dayroom, half of us talking to the ficus plants and the other half looking like they’d just flown in from Dachau. I was in a manic phase, taking twenty showers a day, and this girl—her name was

Lydia—she was trying to get rid of her body. We were a pair. We'd go into her room, close the door against the rules, and she'd say my name over and over—Ichabod Sick, she'd say, like she was tasting the words, Ichabod *Sick*—and she'd describe herself, name each body part like an inventory of disgust, as though what I was doing to her was a punishment, one more way of mortifying her body. Her pelvic bones stuck out like faucets. *Frangible*, I whispered to her like a sex word. She died two months after I was released.

So I was out there at Iowa just trying to hold myself together, keeping my distance from the grad students who wanted to drink beer with the Semi-Famous Young Poet, watching *Love Connection* in my room, or driving for hours through the dirt roads that cut the Iowa countryside. Sometimes I got out and walked through the cornfields, locked myself into a row and just walked, the stalks of corn like blinders on either side of me, and forward the only direction. It was during one of these excursions that I happened upon Steam Days again.

What had been so striking about her as a twelve-year-old—the simple beauty, the asexuality that was so pure that it tipped over into sexuality—was somehow still there in the eighteen-year-old, but now under the yoke of her dress, under the long dropping fabric, there was also the soft insistence of her breasts, of her hips moving like a pledge or a promise. To the poet Ichabod Sick—standing off to the side in lithium-soaked wonder—it was the Marriage of Existence and Essence, the pure Mennonite spirit poured into the physical vessel of a lovely young woman.



“N-32,” a voice called over the PA system. I went up to their table and smiled like a pilgrim.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello,” the daughter answered.

“Do you remember me?”

She threw a look at her mother, smiled to try to cover what she must have considered the rudeness of not remembering me.

“Your name is Grace,” I said.

“Yes...”

“I wrote a poem about you.”

At which mother and daughter again exchanged looks. “B-8” the PA announced.

And then I did one of my idiot-savant things. I reached out and touched her. With my fingertips I touched the girl just where her hair swept under her cap. In another second I think the mother would have screamed bloody murder, but I started reciting “The Atmosphere Cleaves,” and the sound of a poem suddenly in the air—with its music and illogic, like the English language had suffered a mental breakdown—stopped her. They waited until I was done—until the poem with its liquid eroticism and spangled angels, its Bingo game running in the background, had appeared and vanished—and then the mother inserted her forearm in the space between her daughter and me.

“You should go along now.”

“Did you like it?” I asked.

“Yes, but you should go.”

“I didn’t understand it,” the girl said. Her mother shot her a look as if to say who cares whether we understood it, you little fool, but the girl kept her eyes fixed on me.

“Who are you?” she said.

I just stood there and smiled—dumb, discovered, outed.

“Martin,” I said. The old word felt funny in my mouth. “My name is Martin Browne. Marty.”

\* \* \* \*

There is about Herman Yoder the stink of life. His thighs get hairy disappearing into his boxers. His toenails are bent and yellow. There is a brown haze of testosterone and semen hanging about him.

Under his yearbook photo it says *Nickname*: “Yo!” *Quote*: “See ya, suckers!” Somewhere in the fields, closing in on us, there’s the sound of that harvester still.

“Yo,” I say. He takes one of his hands out from under his thighs, gives me the finger, and then shoves his hand back under his leg. “You don’t seem to understand the position on the board,” I say and wave the gun in front of my face like there’s maybe a fly bothering me. “No one knows I’m here. There’s no apparent motive.”

He does a good job of hiding his fear behind the big man’s bravado. “You gonna tell her how I cried and begged for mercy? Is that it?”

“What?”

“That pot-smoking bitch!”

I close my eyes. I do not want Herman Yoder’s wives and/or girlfriends to clutter the equation. “Please,” I say. Through my clothes I can feel *Action Comics #187* in my back pocket. On page twelve is Superman’s dream of a clarified world: a Fortress of Solitude in the arctic waste, without germ, pulse, or decay.

“Tell her to go fuck herself!”

So I shoot his cat. I point the gun first at Herman Yoder’s face and then slide it to where Herman Yoder’s ugly yellow cat is walking with its slinky haunches and I shoot it. It’s a necessary demonstration. A visual aid. The cat flies apart from the impact, then reassembles, rolls over, hisses at the air, tries to get away from its own insides, and then lies down panting. There’s surprisingly little blood.

Herman Yoder is screaming. “Skunk!” he cries. “Skunk!”

What kind of human being names his cat Skunk?  
“Skunk!”

“You’re a very ugly man, Herman Yoder.”

He starts to curse me again, but his voice is gone. Over the sofa there’s a sign, a molded plastic bas-relief of a handgun with the legend: WE DON’T CALL 911. That’s as good as a poem.

“Now,” I say in a tone of voice that says we understand the position on the board now, don’t we? “I’m going to ask you some questions.”

He turns on me a face the poets might describe as distraught, distraught, or disconsolate.

“First question.” I pause to get my thoughts in order. “If,” I say, “someone were to inform you that you were to be executed for a crime you had committed, what crime would come to mind?”

He doesn’t answer.

“What secret offense from your past proportionate to the punishment?”

It seems to be sinking in. The situation he’s in. He seems to be getting it.

“We posit a moral universe in this question,” I say.

“Things add up. Crime and punishment.” And I draw an equals sign in the air with the barrel of the Special.

\* \* \* \*

It is to the defendant’s credit, your Honor, that he did not attempt to seduce the girl, to touch her, to force himself on her in any way. He simply wanted to live within the circumference of her spirit. To hear her voice and see her face. That is not stalking; it’s breathing.

It began quietly. I kept a discreet distance behind the school bus, following it out into the country along the two-lane roads, the snowy landscape broken into forty acre grids, the stubble of corn stalks under the melting white and the moraine of dirt on either side of the road. I followed her to and from school, sometimes to the library, to the mall with her girlfriends, twice into Iowa City where she went with her mother into the University of Iowa Medical Center. After a week the boys in the back of the bus began to catch on, waving and giving me the finger out the back window. How long it took for her to figure it out I don’t know, but by the time I started attending the Lower Deer Creek Mennonite Church—sitting well away from her, mind, but catching glimpses between the *lumpen* heads and shoulders—I could tell by the way her family sat stiff and self-conscious that they knew.

And then there was a period of a couple of weeks when she didn’t go to school, didn’t attend church. The pastor during Sharing and Announcements asked for prayers for her, for Grace Albrecht to recover from her affliction, and I was still sane enough

to worry that she had fallen ill, mad enough to exult that it was Ichabod Sick they sought to save her from.

In *Action Comics* #187 there's a panel of Superman standing under a shower, only it's not a regular shower, it's a super-blowtorch shower and he's burning off the dirt and stains of the world from his invulnerable suit. This is in his Fortress of Solitude. It's made out of ice. He stands with his legs wide apart and powerful.

When one of the church elders approached me, asked me who I was, that's what I told him. I told him about the super-blowtorch shower. And the cleanliness. And the dirt.

\* \* \* \*

On the floor between us, Skunk has finished expiring. I have just asked Herman Yoder if he has some electric clippers, and failing that, a pair of good scissors.

"Your hair," I tell him, wagging the Special like an index finger at his mullet, his body, his whole being. "It's giving off a sour odor."

He gives his head a shake.

"Your body, too."

He just gives me the stink eye.

"Undress," I say. "We need to clean you up."

\* \* \* \*

The prayers of the congregation worked. After ten days away she was back home, then back in school,

back attending church. The poet Ichabod Sick increased his attentions.

Her house was one of those isolated farmhouses you see in the Midwest, with the long dirt drive that right angles through a cornfield up to a simple yard and a plain white frame house. Each afternoon she would step off the bus, empty the mailbox, pointedly not look at the black Pontiac idling at the side of the road, and then ascend the drive, the hem of her long skirt eddying about her ankles, her coat plain—everything about her gray, brown, dull blue—and her clunky shoes and hair swept under her hat, and the poet Ichabod Sick's heart stinging under the superblowtorch of the sight of her.

When I was away from her, there was the mire of the world all around me, the infection that reached me even out on the frozen plains.

I followed her into Wal-Mart, into Susan's Fabrics. Always at a discreet distance. In the town library with her girlfriends she read *People* magazine under the buzzing lights at the back of the periodical room. When she saw me peering at her through the stacks, she dropped the magazine, hurried and found her friends. They whispered and pointed with their eyes.

At church her father came up and told me to stop it, just stop this, he said. She's just a girl, he said. We'll call the police, he said.

In the hospital it was a gastroenterologist she was seeing. The digestive organs. Colitis, ulcers, colon cancer—the bacteria raging, coliforms, fecal streptococci.

And all the time I was writing furious brilliant poems about Beatrice and Lana Lane, about the Sons

of Levi and the fire that cleanses, poems that later in the hospital, mired in swales of depression, I would find to be breathless and incoherent, ugly on the page with their ill-formed limbs and microcephalic heads.

\* \* \* \*

“Grace Albrecht?” Herman Yoder says now. He fixes me with a look from behind the soap and the rivulets of blood oozing down his forehead from where he’s cut himself. “What about her?”

There is something inexpressibly ugly about Herman Yoder’s body. With its massive penis hanging between his legs like an elephant trunk. And the tufts of hair illegibly distributed. The lumpiness about the shoulders, the hirsute back, the thick waist with its red crenulations from the elastic in his boxers.

We have not stopped with cutting off his mullet, but have determined to cleanse his entire body of hair. Accordingly, we have ordered him into his bathtub, and given him his razor and told him to start shaving. First his head, and then his arms, and then his legs, and finally his crotch. The bathwater is turning pink from where he has nicked himself. He has started blubbling once or twice, just like they do in the movies. Once or twice started cursing and calling me names. We have had to discharge a third round into the mirror above the sink by way of persuasion.

Also, the bathroom floor has flooded from where I tried to flush the Achy Breaky t-shirt down the toilet.

“Did you know her?” I ask.

“She’s dead,” he said.

“That wasn’t the question.”

He scrapes the soap from his face. “Of course I knew her. We all knew her.”

“We?” I prod. He names his wife or maybe girlfriend, some other names I’m supposed to recognize. He is still convinced that I am here to avenge a domestic squabble. I’m the guy his pot-smoking wife is seeing or something.

“Listen,” I say to Herman Yoder. I close my eyes because the shattered mirror is reflecting things I know are not there. “Forget your wife. Your wife doesn’t enter into the question. Try to concentrate and answer me: When in the presence of the Innocents, does Herman Yoder do what he can to save them, or does he partake of the massacre?”

He stops shaving his thigh, blinks at me.

“Finds another way home, or not?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Grace Albrecht,” I say. “I’m talking about Grace Albrecht.”

“I haven’t seen Grace Albrecht since high school,” Herman Yoder says; then, like enough is enough: “C’mon, man!”

\* \* \* \*

In the State of Iowa “Stalking in the Fourth Degree” is unwanted behavior constituted of, but not limited to, following, telephoning or initiating communication or contact with a person so as to cause material harm to the mental or emotional health of said person, and is a Class B Misdemeanor.

I was arrested, arraigned, released.



A week later I was arrested again. Two sheriffs showed up at the tent I had pitched on the frozen front yard, roused me out of my Blue Kazoo sleeping bag, cuffed me in full view of the Albrecht family picture window, and drove me to the University of Iowa Hospital where after a lot of this and that I was held in a locked ward awaiting a competency hearing. The records from my previous hospitalizations were entered as evidence. My sister had to come and testify. And the Director of the Writers' Workshop. And then it was back to the locked ward where the manic break happened and I went plunging downward. The walls moved in, the grotto reappeared, I lay flat and two-dimensional on my hospital bed. The Spring semester began without me.

In the crescendos of these episodes my memory gets unreliable, but what I think I remember from those last days in the tent is not sleeping and not eating so as not to have to evacuate waste, and rewriting the *Paradiso* by the light of a can of Sterno, and the cleansing cold, and telling Grace as she came up the drive of the plans I was making, me in my smiling madness clutching Superman's Fortress of Solitude in one mitten and telling her as she hurried away about the arctic desolation, about the ice and the stainless steel cold—how we would live with no food, no waste, no tinge of color.

After a month they moved me out of the locked ward and I began the slow crawl upward, like one of those grade-school graphics on the creation of life: the piscine creature humping itself out of the primordial slime, the nubby fins growing into lizard legs, the starter-kit mammal, the monkey puzzled by its

tail, and finally the hunched but erect-walking Ichabod Sick.

\* \* \* \*

I have asked Herman Yoder for his last words. He is standing in the bathtub with the hairy bathwater lapping at his ankles, a ring of hairy scum about his middle, and his flaccid penis looking like a hanged man.

“The sum of what you’ve learned in your thirty years. That sort of thing.”

I parade him back into the living room, tell him to say goodbye to the pictures on the wall, his mother and father, his kids, the wife I’m sleeping with. And it’s here he loses it. Starts to blubber and cry over his kids, Janie and Buddy for god’s sakes. And he starts to apologize to his wife, says he’s sorry, turns to me, his face all blotchy from the tears and the shaving job, and starts to apologize to me, too, says he’s sorry for whatever it is, whatever he’s done, until I tell him to shut up—just shut the fuck up, Herman Yoder and say goodbye to your kids. He makes a stumbling lunge at me, all blubbery and uncoordinated so that it’s an easy thing to dodge him as he sails past. He ends up on the floor, on his hands and knees, crying into the carpet.

“Skunk,” he says at the sight of his dead cat, and then like a *cri de coeur*, “Skunk!”

Somewhere there’s a tornado siren going off but it’s a balmy October day so maybe there isn’t a tornado siren going off. I kick Herman Yoder and tell him to stand up, march him through the kitchen and

out into the backyard. There's a stupid Jack'n'Jill well and the corn seven feet tall on three sides and growling unseen in it somewhere the harvester guaranteed to appeal to a poet's fancy. I tell him to enter the corn. "What?" he says and I stick the barrel of the Special right in his naked back and push him toward the cornfield.

"We're going to find the Grim Reaper," I say and someone starts laughing.

\* \* \* \*

When the weather warmed and I had made it back to being half human, some of the Workshop students began coming to the hospital for tutorials. We met in the sun room. They brought me flowers, cards, Jujubes because of that poem I wrote about movie-theater candy. I was only thirty-two but I shuffled about the corridors in my pajamas like I was seventy-two. My hair stuck out like Einstein's. I affected a grandfatherly German accent, sucking on my Jujubes and offering suggestions to their poems, a bland word changed here, a stale image there, and let's calm down the overactive lineation, *ja*?

"Like zees," I would say, drawing a line through a word while a young poetess sat next to me with her breasts like frankincense and myrrh, "and zees, *ja*?"

I lay around my room reading Boethius, took part in group, set off on shuffling hikes through the hospital. I went from ward to ward, through clinics, up to the closed doors that led to the ICU, checked out this sun room, that sun room, stared out the front doors at the brightly-colored world outside. In the pediatric

oncology ward I'd sit in the waiting area like a strung-out parent while wispy-headed gnomes tried to play like normal kids. I got down on the floor and played with them—trucks, Legos, Candyland—shared my Ju-jubes, and whenever the door that led to the examining rooms swung open made loud steam-shovel noises to cover the sound of crying children.

Sometimes I just sat there like a lobotomized Lepke, missing all the connections.

But my medication was adjusted, adjusted again, and the world began to fit itself back together. My roommate thought it was hilarious that I was a poet. His name was Foster and I called him John Foster Dulles for no reason at all and we watched ESPN together and played *Go Fish!* and *I Doubt It!* He was a big guy, farted a lot, which made the delicate red scars on his wrists seem all wrong. When I got tired of cards I'd take to the hallways, bringing the hundreds of pages of my winter mania with me. I'd sit in one of the sun rooms and read through them like they were tablets of cuneiform, looking for a comprehensible image, a salvageable line. I would jot these down in a fresh notebook, maybe start playing with the seed of a poem. During one of these sessions my lawyer called with the news that the Albrecht family had asked that the charges be dropped. The air began to lighten. A poem about the three Magi looking for another way home so as not to have to tell Herod about the Christ child began to stumble toward its themes. Advent. Childhood. Destruction. I was working on it—hospital bed cranked up into a reclining position, reading glasses on—trying to rewrite the first line of the second

stanza, something about where I had misplaced myself, when Fat Nettie the Nurse came to tell me I had visitors.

“Shoo, fly,” I said.

She turned and headed back down the hall, her enormous rear-end square and flat like the back of a snow shovel. In the bed next over, behind the privacy curtain, John Foster Dulles farted.

*“I lost him out behind second base,”* I tried out, *“my sane self, I mean.”*

I let the line hang in the air a moment, then unplugged *“him,”* and stuck in *“Marty.”* Tried that out. Then unplugged *“Marty”* and stuck *“him”* back in. I listened for the zones of radiation, for the breeze from right field. It took me a good minute to realize someone was in the doorway again. And that it wasn’t Fat Nettie come back to plump my pillows, or some student, or one of the neighboring nutcases about to claim he was John Wilkes Booth—

She was in a wheelchair and so changed that even with my reading glasses fumbled off I don’t think I would have recognized her if her mother hadn’t been standing behind her. Her mother with her mouth pursed, hair up under her cap, body in rigid disapprobation as if she’d lost some argument just minutes before and was here under protest. It was the girl’s face that was so different. The clarity was gone—the perfect bone structure I had caressed in the ether of madness—and in its place some illness or medication had painted her features on a ball of dough. Everything was swollen, out-sized, and there was a wash of acne across her cheeks and gray crescents under her eyes. But she was smiling,

friendly, maybe a little shy at being so bold.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hi,” I answered like I was fifteen again and couldn’t talk to girls. She wheeled her chair a little further into the room. She was in a green bathrobe with fuzzy slippers on her feet. On her lap there was a stack of what looked like music, those old, yellow Schirmer piano editions.

“We heard you were feeling better.”

“Yes,” I managed, “thank you.”

“We saw you the other day,” she added by way of explanation, “in the sunroom. The one with the piano. I hope you don’t mind.”

I shook my head “no.” I could think of nothing else to say except to ask what was wrong with her, what had happened to her lovely face. But of course I couldn’t ask that. One of my legs began to quiver under the covers. “I’m sorry,” I said in a shaky voice.

“Please...”

“I’m sorry,” I said again, and then it was out of me. I sat up in bed, and with my voice all wrong told her I was sorry over and over again. “Steady as she goes, Mr. Sick,” I heard John Foster Dulles say from the other side of the curtain, but I couldn’t help myself. I kept saying how sorry I was for everything, for frightening her, for hurting her and her family—

“It’s all right,” the girl was trying to say. “You were ill. You weren’t yourself.”

“Yes,” I said, then in a whisper: “no.”

“We don’t mean to upset you,” the mother said. She seemed to want to say something else but stopped herself. And then, almost like an accusation: “They told us you were better.”

“Yes,” I answered. I tried to smile. I tried to look grateful. I tried to look better. “*I am better*,” I said. I held my hands out, helpless. “*I am better*.”

“We just wanted to say,” the girl said with a tight, purposeful smile. “That it’s all right now. We understand.”

I closed my eyes. “Thank you,” I said and this deep, deep sigh came out of me. I looked down into my lap, shoulders slumping, face slack like maybe I *had* had a lobotomy. There on my knees was my poem about the three magi.

“Well...” the mother murmured.

“I have a no-contact order on me,” I blurted out after a moment. I looked at the girl’s ruined face, then up at her mother. Did they not know that? “But stay a minute,” I said. And then I asked would they mind if I read them the poem I was working on? It was a mess, I said, but it was—and then I said this fancy-pants poet-thing: it was the only myrrh I had to offer. They smiled politely.

“Okay,” the girl said. I slipped my reading glasses on.

And so there in a hospital room in Iowa City, with a suicidal fat farter and a manic-depressive with a salvation complex, and a young woman and her mother just trying to be decent, Herod massacred the innocents again, and the living skeletons on Bullfinch 7 made their bodies disappear, and Marty Browne lost himself out behind second base. Smell of leather, glint of gold, something something something, and a game of *Sorry!* in the kids’ oncology ward.

I don’t think they made heads or tails of it, but when I was done, the girl said it was lovely anyway. I thanked her, made the usual excuses about it just

being a first draft, then laid the notebook aside and took my reading glasses off. Now it was my turn to be embarrassed. I nodded at the piano music on her lap. Did she play?

“Oh, I used to.”

“We should be going,” the mother said.

“I used to but I quit,” the girl went on. “I’m just trying to get a little of it back.” She let her fingers dance across a keyboard. “A little each day if I feel strong enough.”

“Good,” I said. “That’s good.”

She seemed to understand that I just wanted to have a normal conversation. That it was *important* to have a normal conversation.

“I quit because of a *traumatic experience*,” she said. She turned to her mother. “You remember that?”

“Yes,” the mother answered. Non-committal, like okay we’ve done our good deed....

“I was in this talent show,” the girl went bravely on, turning back to me. “In middle school?” And she started in on a story about how she’d messed up in front of the whole school, how she’d had to stop and start over again—this too-hard Bach invention she’d foolishly chosen—how she couldn’t see the music because her eyes were swimming, and the outside of me was listening to her, smiling and listening, but the inside was thinking how close to the truth Ichabod Sick had been. Without even knowing it, in his madness, how close to the truth: she *was* something special. It wasn’t just empty beauty. She had—hadn’t she? in spite of everything?—sought out Ichabod Sick. She had come into his sickroom, into his sick



life, and without ever saying it, she had forgiven him.

“I was practically in tears,” she was saying. “When I finally finished there’s this kid from my class in the wings, and he’s holding these tennis balls because he’s on next, and he says: You stink.” And she laughed a rueful laugh. “You stink,” she said. “This kid. Herman Yoder. I’ll never forget it.” And she looked down into her lap, at the piano music, at the memory.

“Tennis balls?” I found myself saying.

“He juggled.”

“Oh, I see.”

And that was it. We said a few more things—I mentioned something about Robert Frost not being able to read his poem at Kennedy’s inauguration because the wind made his eyes water—and then she was saying again how glad she was I was feeling better, and I was thanking her, and then with all three of us smiling her mother wheeled her out of the room. A week later I was discharged, and a couple of months after that I left Iowa City. I never saw her again.

But some years later at a posh reception I cornered this mini-skirted gastroenterologist and under the ruse of researching a poem asked her about the swollen face, the acne—what GI disease was that a symptom of? Side effects, she said, running a finger along her spaghetti straps—medication. Prednisone. Probably Crohn’s Disease, she said—a very nasty condition where the body tries to reject its own intestines, current research indicating that an overactive immunological system was attacking waste in the intestines, usually leading to ulcers, fistulas, a probable colostomy and bowel cancer down the road,

did I want to come up and see her medical books sometime?

\* \* \* \*

Against the wall of corn Herman Yoder looks like an erect, hairless, man-sized possum, all pink and ugly and rodent-like.

“What pleasure in the world?” I’m saying to him. “What small beauties?” We have been cataloging his many murders while the sun shines and the world ripens. I have in my head that October day ten years ago when to keep myself from going mad I hiked through a cornfield not so far from this one and stumbled on Steam Days the second time—the cuts and scratches, the dirt, the smell, and then the beautiful young woman. And now Herman Yoder’s skin all red and blotchy from the cornstalks. He keeps asking what the fuck we’re doing and I keep telling him that I am annihilating him. I am annihilating you, Herman Yoder, I say and I march him this way and that, sometimes with the corn rows, sometimes against. On occasion the roar of the harvester descends upon us like we’re in a fifties sci-fi dinosaur thriller.

“What are we *doing*?” Herman Yoder screams back at me.

“We’re looking for sanctuary,” I tell him. “The atmosphere cleaving and revealing the untouched breast. N-42.”

And I start to call out Bingo numbers as we go. Herman Yoder keeps saying that he didn’t do anything—I didn’t *do* anything, man, he says over and over.

“G-51!” I cry.

“I don’t even *know* you!”

“B-8!”

He tries to run—angry, impotent. He crashes through the rows of corn, but he’s naked and his feet are bare and hurting and it’s no problem for me to keep up. I pelt his glabrous back with Bingo numbers. After a couple of minutes we break out into a waste of stubble and dirt. And there’s the harvester a few acres away, green and yellow and toy-like, a sail on the horizon for poor Herman Yoder who begins running toward it, waving and crying out. It’s then that I have to tell him to stop. I fire off a round over his head for punctuation.

“Now, now,” I scold when I draw up to him. He is breathing heavily and there are smudges of blood on his shaved legs. He’s bent over and he’s got his hands on his knees like an exhausted sprinter.

“It’s a beautiful autumn day, Herman Yoder,” I tell him. And it is. The sky is blue and the sun is shining and there are lovely threads of high cirrus overhead. There are golden and scarlet treetops in the distance and the white steeple of the Historic Register church a couple hundred yards away. These are the sights that surrounded her all her life. This is her home. “This is her home,” I say out loud with deep satisfaction. “What?” I hear, but I am closing my eyes, imagining her in the world again—the soft scent of her in the breeze, the deep delicious reds of her jellies, the launderer’s soap, the refiner’s fire.

“In my travels, Herman Yoder,” I say, inhaling everything there is to inhale, “I have often thought of Grace Albrecht back here, the fixed point of the

compass—” and here I lift my nose to a faint scent of the past—“and whatever happened to me it was all right because I knew that she was here and that it was right that Ichabod Sick should be an attractor of the ugly and the dirty, the sex and the vanity and the petty crimes. It was a way of sacrificing myself.”

I open my eyes. He has straightened up, but it isn't easy to stand naked out of doors. Some intuitive shame takes hold of us, doesn't it?—has taken hold of Herman Yoder so he's got one of his arms folded in front of him, his fist tucked up under his chin like a shivering child just out of his bath, and the other hand across his private parts. I put the muzzle of the Special to my lips and kiss it. I'm feeling pretty good right now. The harvester is coming toward us, mowing the circles of hell around us—the dirt, the waste, the remnant stubble—and that feels pretty good too.

“What I didn't reckon on was you back here, near her, you with your tennis balls and the pus oozing out.”

The guy inside the harvester has been watching us for some time now. A naked man and a man with a gun standing in the middle of his cornfield! I raise the gun, stiff-arm it at Herman Yoder's head so it looks like I'm about to execute him. Like that famous Saigon photo. The guy in the harvester slides the window back and shouts something at us but we can't hear him over the distance and the roar of the dinosaurs. I calmly swivel the gun, move my arm ninety degrees until the gun is pointing straight at the harvester, straight into the window where the guy starts having a fit. Then I bend my arm at the elbow, bring the muzzle slowly up to my own head and rest it on

my temple. I trust all three of us appreciate the tripartite structure, the classical composition.

“I will now recite a poem, Herman Yoder,” I say. “It will explain, perhaps, the necessity of our execution.”

A pheasant flushes in front of the harvester. The farmer guy is still watching us, twisted around in his seat. He has what looks like a cell phone clapped to his ear. But Herman Yoder isn’t watching. He’s begun backing up, edging toward the rows of corn, eye on the gun still pointed at the madman’s head. He has the look of the desperado who’s about to make a break for it. For some reason there’s a bell ringing in the cornfield. The average age for onset of bipolar disorder is nineteen.

“*Where then is the other way?*” I start. And there he goes, spinning around like a running back and crashing into the wall of corn. “*Where the world with no Herod and his scimitars?*” I shout after him. I reload my gun, let him think he’s maybe getting away, and then tumble into the corn after him. I shout the next line of the poem at his back, and the next, the stuff about the leukemia kid and Lydia with her pelvic bones like faucets. I get out of breath pretty fast, so that by the time the poem peels off into the smell of my Spaulding glove, I’m only pelting him with bits and pieces of it—the sane world of my childhood, a smiling kid, leadoff hitter for his Little League team, and all that goldengrove unleaving stuff. I fire a shot in the air just for the heck of it. And then its on to the fourth stanza with its gift rescinded and the pain and the mania and the crumbling. Babies thrown down wells, skewered on swords. The Magi circle back on

themselves, return to the manger because there is no other road, there is no other way home. Ahead of me Herman Yoder staggers out of the corn onto a lawn. For a moment I think we've circled back to his house—symmetry!—but then there's a scream. I've got just enough time to see the steeple looming over us—big and white and square—before I'm out of the corn too. There's the little white church I'd passed two hours earlier, and the old graveyard beside it, and out along the road shiny cars and pickup trucks. It's a wedding, for Christ's sakes. There's a couple dozen people down along the road and lining the sidewalk running up to the church. The men are all in black. The women are bright yellow and ruby and lavender. There are some Mennonites sprinkled among them. Some of them are wearing hats like it's 1958.

*"And what use?"* I shout at them. Herman Yoder has stumbled, collapsed onto the old turf of the graveyard. *"This frankincense, this myrrh!"*

They turn their eyes from the naked man to the man shouting at them. Who knows, maybe it's a funeral. I lift my arm in the air and the sight of a gun sets everyone running. I fire a round in the air. Ronnie told me it was a weapon, not a gun.

Herman Yoder is saying something. I take a step toward him, bend over his naked body. "What?" I ask him.

"Go away," he manages in between heaves of breathing. "Just go the fuck away."

"Poem's not done," I tell him. I take a step back and catch my breath. There are people hiding behind tree trunks. Behind cars. Other cars are peeling out down the road. There's a little girl in a pretty aquamarine dress calling for her mother. I start in on the

last stanza, the stuff about the maculate world and Grace Albrecht's laugh like a necklace of silvery syllables. And with each line I shoot something. I shoot a gravestone. I shoot a tree. I shoot a window in the church so that the glass shatters and tinkles down onto the pews inside. There's screaming and cowering and sudden silences. Some guy who was heading for the shotgun in the back of his pickup truck has changed his mind and hit the dirt. I reload. I've run out of poem but there's still plenty to shoot. The cornfield. The steeple. A sparrow on a power line. Overhead there's the blue sky all peaceful and untroubled as if there's nothing going on down here. I raise the gun up over my head and take a shot at it. Somewhere there's a child crying. I aim at the sky and take a second shot, a third, but it's still there, still blue and lovely and serene. It stretches from horizon to horizon. And there's only so much ammunition.

# The Black Wig

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by Kim Henderson

It is time to leave the party. My wife is giving every guy there fuck-me eyes, which is what she does every Halloween when she puts on a black wig that makes her blue eyes look like a movie star's. She finds various excuses for black wigs—Cleopatra, Amelie, Mia Wallace. But it's always for the same reason: so that once a year guys will do a double-take when they see a woman who is in no way blended and blurred, a woman of great contrast—which equals daring, which equals a good fuck.

I'm a robot this year. Completely homemade—cardboard and duct tape and wacky sport sunglasses, which are great because no one can see my facial expression when my wife mildly betrays me with other men. And she had to pick *this* party, full of engineer dorks, men who are supposed to be my friends. I figure I can tolerate it once a year, so I nurse a beer in the kitchen and try not to watch her parade around in her big black 1970's wig, pretending to be best friends with every guy there, giving out hugs and saying in that high-pitched drunk squeal, "Remember when?"

Of course, she's not really daring, nor is she a slut. The costume of great contrast is what it is: a costume. Worn once a year. If she were truly daring, she'd dye



the damn rat's nest and go for contrast all year, but of course then eventually the hair would lose its sheen and hang like handfuls of moss, and she would just be one of those pasty Goth chicks that are a dime a dozen in any city mall, the really skinny ones in big black boots made of fake leather that squeak like a wet raincoat with every step. But then no one would really want to screw her.

I swirl my warm Budweiser and talk to some guy dressed as a quark—red shirt and a U for “Up”—and somewhere is his nerdy girlfriend, the anti-quark, in pale blue with a bar over her U. They have it right with the matching couples' costumes. A quark can't fool around with a slutty witch or a French maid, not with Miss Anti-Quark around the corner. Maybe next year Holly and I can wear the two-person cow costume we spotted at Mega-Halloween. Of course she'll get to be the head with its four-inch-long eyelashes, and I'll be stuck blind in the back, heavy with udders. The ass.

This quark and I are talking about the theoretical side of quantum physics, which is apt considering he and I took physics and thermodynamics in college together, along with most of the men here. But I don't care much for the topic at this moment, because I don't want to think about if there is another version of Holly who's guiding one of these guys to a bedroom, or several of these guys. However, talking helps me not notice various characters' hands lingering on her waist as she makes her hugging rounds—Fred Flintstone, George Jetson, The Riddler—so I go on and on about Copenhagen versus Many-Worlds while other guys' pinkies snake below her panty line.

Right on the other side of the countertop, she flings her arms around some guy with a smeared-on black eye, which requires I physically shield my gaze with my hand, pretending there's something in my contact. This quark is now blabbing about Many-Worlds theory in a movie he saw—is he actually trying to keep my attention averted? He's talking ninety miles a minute, and Black-Eye Dude has just wrapped his arms around Holly and sniffed her hair. She's hugging him, her legs spread a little too far, her little black mini-skirt stretched taut—who is she even supposed to be with this outfit? Tina Turner? Jackie Brown?—and he's got both hands on her back, and his thumbs are massaging, and he's smelling her with his eyes closed. She probably reeks of pheromones.

A hyper Chewbacca leaps past them, over the countertop, swiping beer bottles onto the floor with his giant feet, and yanks the refrigerator open. He grabs two bottles of beer and dangles his pink human tongue, which looks unusually small and disgusting with all that fur around it. The eyes are a boring gray, and a touch of pale skin surrounding them glows under the fluorescent light, where there is no fur. I glance at Holly and she has snuggled deeper into the black-eyed-P's arms—not pea, the letter P, there's a P in electrical tape on his shirt, the clever bastard. She glares at Chewbacca. She doesn't like frat boy types. I wonder myself how this Chewbacca got here, but maybe he's just a normal guy—like the quark or me—who's not himself tonight.

I can't see Chewbacca and not think of my old college roommate Rodney. One rainy afternoon in our dorm, he paused *Star Wars* to explain what an "Angry

Chewbacca” was, including a personal story and an Internet example. Hear something three times and you’re less likely to forget it. He spent an afternoon showing me fleshy images on the computer and explaining every dirty thing one could do to a woman—the Angry Pirate, the Hot Karl, the Alabama Hot-pocket. The kinds of things that are supposed to be funny because they aren’t really supposed to happen, the kinds of things that make Holly’s lips pale, that make her curl into herself and go silent. He topped the day off with a video of his own—at the time he was getting eighteen-year-old girls drunk and videotaping them screwing beer bottles. Like most of the other freshman boys he’d cornered, I went to bed early that night, spent my subsequent evenings in the library, and requested a roommate switch at semester.

“All right, that’s enough,” I say into my beer bottle, and the only person who’s heard me is the quark, who gets a hurt look on his face. The black-eyed P is massaging my wife’s hips—he clearly isn’t brave enough to go for the meaty ass cheeks and instead runs his hands over the bony sides—and the quark stutters and says, “I was going su-somewhere with that,” and I say, “Not you, I haven’t had enough of *this*. What about microscopic events?”

This isn’t how she sees me, is it? Like this blinking nerd, dressed as a quark with a military crew cut he’s had since eighth grade and cheap square glasses? Really, no wonder she gravitated to the black-eyed P, because now that I look closer he does have that stylish messy gelled hair, and whereas I have what she once called “raisin lips,” he’s got a big, plump, stupid-looking mouth, the type a woman would want to kiss.

The best way to round her up is by attempting to be cute, so I tell the quark to get her attention so I can mouth, “Pimp Bot Wants to Bop.” Then I’ll do a little robot dance. What I won’t do is yank her away by the arm, or try to fight the black-eyed P, or spit the word “slut” at her in public. I learned those lessons long ago. The quark, pleased with a mission, darts away and taps her shoulder with a pale finger. She turns her head just enough for me to see a flash of eyelash and a stab of blue buried behind big black wig. He mumbles something and her brows press together, and she cuts her eyes in my direction before shrugging the quark’s finger off and walking away from a hunch-shouldered nerd and a shocked black-eyed P. She just ditched the best looking guy at the party. The quark must have said the wrong thing.

As soon as he comes back I trudge after her, my cardboard body suit really slowing me down, but she’s disappeared into the labyrinth of back rooms and bathrooms and sliding glass doors. I slog through the crowded hallway, getting lots of glares, especially when a stray strip of duct tape catches a girl’s hair and rips a handful out. I pull it off of the tape in a frizzy ball and hand it back to her, as if it’s of any use, and she makes a face and spikes her heel on the ground like she means business, and her boyfriend, who appears to be dressed as nothing but a giant, snarls. When you are already freakish you don’t have to dress up for Halloween, and you’re still more interesting than monotone people like me dressed as cardboard robots. The girl starts crying over her hair and this guy gives me a look, and it’s that time of night when everyone’s smiles are looking a bit tired and lipstick

is worn off and Halloween makeup is smudged and skin is hot and itchy underneath cheap fabric and thick face paint, which the costumed now realize they spent way too much time arranging and preparing for this unmemorable Halloween party.

I could make it memorable. I could be the guy who picks a fight with someone way bigger than me, the guy who gets the crap beat out of him in the front yard and leaves blood or even a tooth behind—and maybe another version of me does—but even that isn't really memorable in the scheme of Halloween parties, because doesn't it always happen? I don't want to be the martyr this year, so I think I'll take my abuse quietly, thank you Holly. Still, I need to find her so I can woo her into going home, because I can't take anymore talk of alternate universes and who I could have been or who I might be, some other version of me far from here who never met Holly, or who met a better Holly, and for whom the timing was right and who is probably really happy with a good haircut and no need for embarrassing adult debauchery on a kiddie holiday.

A dinosaur and man-rabbit grab my shoulders and drag me toward the den. They want to play pool. I want to find Holly. "We'll play just until James gets here," the dinosaur says.

"James?"

He pulls on my cardboard arm, which starts to come apart at the duct tape seam. "From Land Works?"

"Oh, why does he matter?"

"He's not in land development anymore." The man-rabbit laughs. "He's an 'actor.' And he's got a little something prepared."

The den is smoky. These guys don't party often so when they do they attempt to do it up right, cigars and all. I chalk a cue while the dinosaur gathers his tail and awkwardly breaks, clumsily knocking the six-ball into the corner pocket. The room is too small for a pool table; it is bedroom-sized and now that I look, smears of old pink paint shine through the white: it was once a child's room. I spend most of the game dodging people and drinking water, suddenly aware, in this small ex-child's space, of how drunk I am. I knock the cue ball off the table and it hits the wall, startling a few onlookers.

"Somebody needs to be cut off," some Marilyn whispers to her Scarface boyfriend. They don't fit in here, or else tonight they are really trying to be something they're not.

"I'm fine," I say, but I can't remember how many beers I had while watching Holly. Maybe it doesn't matter. While I am waiting for my next turn, leaning against the vaguely pink wall and remembering Holly last Halloween on a twin bed with three mesmerized men, Chewbacca walks by with a pretty blond on his arm, who appears to be dressed as nothing but a slut.

Without her wig, Holly looks like maybe *she's* trying to be Marilyn Monroe. She does not blend in. She does not blur. I wish she realized this. Maybe it would be enough.

I watch through the haze. They peer into the room. She sees me and looks away. She holds his paw like it's a skunk. She does not look happy. He kisses her, and she leans her head back and lets him, but it is the stiffest, most passionless kiss I have ever witnessed.

I am surprisingly not jealous—I would almost consider it a non-kiss, the way she didn't move her lips—but I know my role and so I drop the cue soundly on the floor and stomp out. They quickly disappear. For a moment, I stand in the dark hallway. To chase, or not to chase. I wander toward the kitchen, which is now empty. The quark and his anti-quark have gone, probably to make little preons, like Holly and I should be doing. I turn and head for the bathroom, where I promptly lock the door.

The bathroom turns out to be quite a convenient place to have locked myself. I raise the toilet seat and expel my drinks and guacamole, making sure the mess all goes one place, then I flush and rinse my mouth and sit against the wall where the heater's going. It is quiet, except for the sound of hot air. No one knocks, no one calls for me. I should have stopped them. Or is this the way it's supposed to be? I don't know what she wants.

On the floor, next to the bathtub, I find her wadded up wig. I lean my head against the wall, relieved to have semi-sharp vision again. The wig is ratty in my hands, tangled. I stretch a curly strand and it snaps back, a little out of place. I hold it up to the light. What I expect to see is netting. I expect to see some light through it. I expect to be able to shred it easily, which is what I'd like to do and probably what I'm supposed to do.

At first, that's all I get: transparent black, salty scalp, the scent of a body's warmth, the smell it leaves behind. But when I open the wig just so, in the light, I see the people, tiny, from the other side of the wall. The man-rabbit, the dinosaur, Marilyn and Scarface,

buried behind locks of acrylic hair. I lower the wig and they're gone. Raise it, open it, and they're back. I sit up on my knees, my nose millimeters from their micro-bodies.

"It's James," the man-rabbit says.

I am surprised to see myself, looking small and slouched in the crowd. Paler than I realized. "James, from Land Works?"

"Not anymore." The man-rabbit snickers. "He's an 'actor' now."

James, looking regal in a Victorian costume, draws a crowd. He talks about his love of science—when did he lose his love of science? Amidst the papers and papers and papers, the signature stamps, every angle of every pipe in the sewage systems under housing developments, under a library. All those books up there and here he was, his nose buried in the ground, his eyes on dirt, concrete, utility maps, project proposals, everything that got in the way. He speaks about the play he is going to recite from, about a character named Valentine. His love of physics reborn in theater.

"The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. It's the way nature created itself, on every scale, the snowflake and the snowstorm."

The dinosaur sips from a beer bottle tucked like a toothpick between his giant prehistoric claws. "Of course," he laughs. "James is James is James."

I glance into the darkness behind me. "I need to find—"

"What?"

I sigh. Look at me, shrinking in my cardboard armor. "Nothing."



I shake the wig and instead of the people on the other side of the wall there is a storm. A ball of hail shatters our naked porch light. This happened. But we weren't home. There was a storm a month ago, while we were visiting Holly's grandparents. Through the veil of the curtains, through the haze of the storm, I see us making love in our bedroom, while the hail stipples our car. There is no condom wrapper on the floor. There is no birth control pill on the bedside table.

"People were talking about the end of physics. Relativity and quantum looked as if they were going to clean out the whole problem between them. A theory of everything. But they only explained the very big and the very small. The universe, the elementary particles."

"But not the everyday," I say.

The dinosaur belches in my ear. "Isn't it wild? James, James, James."

"What I don't understand?" I say. "Women."

"Ah, they're easy," the dinosaur says. "It's all about the moon."

"And men?" I say.

"Easy, too. All about this." The dinosaur grabs the smooth fabric at the crotch of his costume. He doesn't even laugh. I look small beside him, insignificant. Not manly at all.

A shake of the hair and there I am, pink-cheeked and eager, eighteen. Was I really so young, as a freshman in college? Look at that acne, hear that stutter. Telling Rodney I'm m-m-mu-moving out at semester. Uncomfortable conversations bring out my speech impediment. I'd nearly forgotten.

"Am I really that gross?" he asks.

I shrug. "More d-d-di-disrespectful."

“Wow.” He stares at his computer. “Sorry, man.”

Except that’s not how I did it. I privately requested a room switch. I slipped out with my things the day after he left for the winter break. He never knew where I disappeared to.

“The ordinary-sized stuff which is our lives, the things people write poetry about—clouds—daffodils—waterfalls—and what happens in a cup of coffee when the cream goes in—these things are full of mystery, as mysterious to us as the heavens were to the Greeks.”

“Mystery,” I say.

“Isn’t he great?” The dinosaur says. “James will always be James.”

“James can’t see the forest for the trees.”

The dinosaur sips from his beer. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“We’re not all unique snowflakes, buddy.” I pat the dinosaur’s padded shoulder.

“Aw. So our first grade teachers were lying.”

“Yep.”

“And physics?”

I move to the doorway. “Maybe our brains are like galaxies. Predictable. Or at least, our habits are.” Then I walk out, into the black of the hallway, off, I presume, to spy on my wife.

By graduation, I’ve filled out a little. Smooth skin, bright eyes. The best I never looked. Posing for photos with Rodney, of all people, in my black cap and gown. Mom isn’t dead yet. She’s there, taking the photos. We each have an arm around a girl. Mine wears a promise ring, flashes it in a photo. She stands different than Holly. Taller. I can tell this girl only smiles if she feels like it.

“We can’t even predict the next drip from a dripping tap when it gets irregular,” says James. “Each drip sets up the conditions for the next, the smallest variation blows prediction apart.”

I snicker. “But I could’ve predicted this. James is James is James.”

“Not this, though.” The dinosaur raises his beer bottle, as if he’s going to chuck it at James.

“When you push the numbers through the computer you can see it on the screen. The future—” James sighs heavily, “—is disorder.”

The bottle is still wielded above the dinosaur’s giant green head.

“But you don’t have a reason to,” I say. “So I know you won’t.”

The bottle shatters against the wall behind James. He ducks, wipes glass dust from his wig and shoulders. Someone pins the dinosaur against the wall. Beneath the mask, he is crying. Sobbing. Those of us in the room all exchange a glance. Somebody was going to lose it. That’s what we get for making Jell-O shots, we all say. Like it’s a frat party.

I stretch the black wig taut and there we are: our last college party. It looks like a bunch of freshmen took over. We are drunk and sentimental, carrying our graduation caps around and repeating stories of parties, professors, classes and women that changed our lives. We don’t want jobs, wives, house payments. Our girls are in the kitchen, taking Jell-O shots. Rodney is drunk and loud. His nerve disorder is acting up and he stumbles into walls and people, mostly girls. “Sorry.” He folds his body around a scared-looking blond. She doesn’t look like she belongs here. Instead

of pushing him off, like all the others have, she gives him a plastic, sad smile, and lets him wrap his arm around her waist.

“Hey, Rodney.” I pull him off of her. “Susan asked for you. She’s in the kitchen.”

“Susan,” he says. He turns to the blond. “Have you met my girlfriend Susan? I think you’d like her.”

She laughs politely, touches an earring. I pat her shoulder in a brotherly way. “Why don’t you come sit down.” Rodney stumbles off and I smile. “Sorry for him. What’s your name?”

“Holly.” She lets me lead her to the couch. Still, I’m smiling, but my eyes are darting around like a cave-man’s, like if anybody touches this girl, I’ll go ballistic.

Behind us, there is a sound of distress. A woman. Or is laughter? Or is it lust?

“What was that?”

“Shh.” The dinosaur points to the center of the room. “It’s James.”

“The unpredictable and the predetermined—”

“My wife.”

“Shut up, dude.” The dinosaur gestures wildly. “It’s James.”

“I have to find my wife.”

The dinosaur drops a giant hand on my shoulder. “Dude, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

He sighs. “Don’t make it harder on yourself.”

The ball of hail breaks our porch light. It is dark inside the house. Our car is gone. The bedroom is empty and cold.

“The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together—”

“Hey, have you seen Holly?”

The dinosaur tilts his giant head.

“My wife?”

He throws his claws up and I wander the house, looking for Holly. I spot her in kitchen, standing bent over the fridge, probably searching for more white wine. I start to say something, but then there’s Chewbacca, watching her.

“Hey, pretty girl,” he says. She stands up, straightens her blouse, smooths her skirt. “Hello.”

“Can I make you a drink?”

She stands back, peers into the fridge. Lets him get the wine out. Oh, Holly.

“Hey, what color is your real hair?”

She touches her wig. “I like it black.”

“A black wig, I don’t know.” He steps closer. “It makes me think of black lingerie. Like, it’s meant to be removed.” And he peels it from her head. And she lets him. And I let him.

I stand up. My knees crack. For a moment, my vision goes dark, like when you get up too fast, but I find the door handle. I wad the wig up and drop it into the trash. I’ve seen enough.

She isn’t in the kitchen, in front of the open fridge. No, she already was. I enter the black hallway and begin opening bedroom doors. But how long have I been gone? Tucked away safely in the bathroom?

I walk by the den, where people congratulate James. He talks about his love of science. He talks about getting it back.

To the right is the last bedroom. The door is pulled shut. I turn back to James, who beams. My hand lingers over the bedroom doorknob. I touch it, and it

is cold, and I let go and veer left. I shake James's hand. We talk about his new life. He asks about my job and I say, yes, I still find it fulfilling.

"And the missus?"

"What?"

"Your wife, Holly. Is she here?"

"Um."

The dinosaur pats my back.

"Congrats, James," I say, and I back off. Toward the last room.

But by the time I get there, she is already leaving. She is alone in there, but her makeup is smeared and her costume is skewed and she is trying and failing to straighten her skirt. Something is wrong with it.

"Hey there," I say. She gazes at me, through me.

"Ready to go?"

Her makeup is a mess and her hair is ratted and her skin is pink and she has that rash she gets on her chest when she is nervous, or sometimes with sex. I glance around, now, like a caveman. Ready to go ballistic. Ready to do what I'm supposed to.

"Simon," she says. Her eyes are glazed. Her hands shake. She wants me to say it, first.

"Let's go," I say. "I got sick, in the bathroom."

She steadies herself on the bed and examines her strawberried knee.

"Let's go," I say again, and my voice cracks. Her eyes snap forward and I clear my throat. I lead her out. We shake against each other, all the way to the car.

Something tells me that no matter how drunk she is, she will remember this in the morning. She will remember this forever. We will remember this forever.

We will live quietly with this between us, like the box of black wigs and costumes that separates our sections of the closet.

On the slow, drunk drive home, I think how surely some other version of me tried to rescue her. And another one succeeded. A version of me charged across the room and ripped Chewbacca's mask off, to reveal this man or that—I imagine a friend, an enemy, Rodney. I will never know who he was, because I will never ask. But some version of me knows, the version who tore the mask off, bloodied the nose, carried the girl through the clapping crowd and home for a bath and bed. A version of me heard a different play, different lines. A version of me stood still because he was too embarrassed to move, a version of me stood still because he was disgusted and felt she deserved whatever she got, a version of me stood still because his heart had broken. A version of me went nuts and stabbed Chewbacca with a kitchen knife. A version punched the black-eyed P, so we never got this far. A version of me, oh desperate me, punched Holly years ago, so maybe maybe maybe she wouldn't do this again. They all got sick at the end of the night. Predictable. Disorder.

I get Holly home and she takes a long shower and together, we fall into bed. I take a long shower and together we fall into bed. We take a long shower and together we fall into bed. Together, like always, we fall into bed.

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James's recitations are from: Stoppard, Tom. *Arcadia*. London, New York: Faber and Faber, 1993. 1.4, pages 47-48.

# **The Comforts of Home**

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by Anne Leigh Parrish

In the Finger Lakes town of Dunston, New York, the spring rain had fallen for four straight days and was falling again when the old man moved in. He carried one box at a time from the trunk of his Cadillac while Beau stood across the street and watched. He wondered what it would be like having an old man in the trailer park. Everyone else was younger. Beau and his wife, Eldeen, were in their twenties. The people next to them were about the same age, with four kids who slept in bunk beds in their living room. On the other side of them was a gay guy who worked at Target, and next to him was a retired cop. No one was friendly or even nice, something Eldeen often complained about.

The old man was careful as he hauled his boxes inside. Beau had seen old men like that in Iraq, setting out their fruit in the market, their veined hands slow and sure. The younger men's hands were fast and reached his way to greet or beg, or sometimes were hidden deep in the pockets of their Western pants, which made him go quiet and cold wondering what they'd pull out.

Beau wished he had his old slingshot. Even a small rock would make a big noise on the metal siding of the old man's trailer. The old man might hit the deck,



thinking he was being shot at. That would be something to see.

The old man hauled another box to the trailer and stumbled on the top stair. Beau laughed. He couldn't help it. He'd always found that kind of thing funny. Once, Eldeen stumbled and he laughed for about five minutes. She didn't talk to him then for three whole days.

The old man appeared in the doorway, stared down at his car as if he'd forgotten what he was doing, and went back inside. Beau wondered if he were loopy. His own grandfather had lost his marbles in his early seventies and imagined a whole family of people who'd never existed. Eldeen said he couldn't have suffered from Alzheimer's in that case, because if he did, he'd have forgotten people, not made them up. Eldeen thought she knew what she was talking about because of her leg. Suffering might give you wisdom, Beau thought, but then again, it might not.

Eldeen drove up in their pickup truck. She was a pretty woman with wavy brown hair she liked to put clips in. Today they were shaped like strawberries. She'd had to go to the grocery store, and he didn't want to go along. Grocery shopping was the most boring thing he'd ever done. Eldeen didn't mind it. She went up and down the aisles talking to herself, commenting on the prices of things, wondering aloud if she should make this or that for dinner. He used to tell her not to, because people looked at her.

"They look at me anyway," she said, again because of her leg. Sometimes she used a crutch with a brace that went around her upper arm. It caused a sore just above the elbow, so she only used it when she had to.

Eldeen got out of the truck.

“Who’s that?” she asked Beau.

“Beats me.”

“Must be a new neighbor.”

“Must be.”

Eldeen limped across the road. It was a fairly wide road, and it took her a little time. When she reached the old man’s car, he came down the stairs and shook Eldeen’s hand. Eldeen ran her fingers through her hair, something she did when she was nervous, then pointed behind her. *That’s us, just across there*, Beau imagined her saying. *Oh, yes, it’s a nice little place here, isn’t it?* Eldeen was upbeat. A little too upbeat at times. The old man lifted his arm toward his open door, and they both went inside. She didn’t come out for several minutes. *Why, if this isn’t the cutest old place you have here! Folks that lived here before weren’t too neighborly*. Eldeen had tried to make friends with them, too. She and the wife had had words in the end, about what Beau didn’t know. Eldeen appeared in the door of the old man’s trailer, then limped down the three concrete steps that all the trailers in the park had, across the road, and up the stairs to her own home.

Beau brought in the groceries from the truck. At the store someone else loaded them for her, and then Beau was always home to bring them inside. Beau had been discharged from the Army for over six months and still hadn’t found work. He spent a lot of time eating cereal and watching the news. Eldeen kept the books for a liquor store three days a week. They’d asked her to go full-time. She didn’t care to, but would if need be. “And you know what *that*

means,” she said. She threatened to turn all household chores over to him. Beau hadn’t handled a broom, vacuum cleaner, or dirty dish since he returned. Before he enlisted, he helped out a lot, even though he had a full-time job then as a cashier at the drug store.

With the recession the only place hiring was the gun factory, and Beau didn’t want to think about guns. A guy he’d gotten close to in Iraq shot himself in the head one night after another guy they’d sometimes played cards with got blown up in a roadside bombing. Beau had tried to wrench the gun free from the dead guy’s hand, and couldn’t. He didn’t remember trying to remove the gun. The whole thing was a blank. Someone else had told him what he’d done. He’d tried to put it together, make sense of his action, and couldn’t.

“Maybe you were only trying to help him. Maybe you didn’t know he was already gone,” Eldeen said. Beau thought it was possible. His uncle, the one who lost his mind in Vietnam, sat around his parents’ basement and played Russian Roulette with his sidearm. One day the uncle was passed out drunk and Beau took the gun and threw it in the creek. He wasn’t accused of taking it because everyone knew the uncle wasn’t right in the head. It was said that he had hocked it, or locked it up some place he couldn’t remember. Eldeen kept a nine-millimeter in the drawer of her bedside table. “In case we get robbed,” she’d said. Beau thought she was nuts. For one thing, she didn’t know how to use it. For another, they didn’t have anything someone would risk getting shot at to come in and steal. He’d like to get rid of that gun, too, and knew he’d have to explain himself to Eldeen. So, the gun stayed put.

Summer came, and everyone's windows opened. The trailers were in a tight cul-de-sac and sounds normally kept inside leaked out. From the cop's place came classic rock. The big family had Disney tunes. The Target guy, when he was home, liked opera. Only the old man kept quiet. Beau was charged with keeping the grass cut along the common strip, and once, as he pushed his mower, he leaned in close under the old man's kitchen window and heard a talk radio program discussing the pros and cons of uniform health coverage.

One evening Eldeen and Beau sat on their stairs and watched the twilight fall. He took her hand in his, and after a moment she took it back and ran it through her hair.

"Guess what?" she asked.

"Can't."

"I asked Sam if you could drive their delivery truck." Sam was Eldeen's boss at the liquor store.

"I don't want to drive a truck."

"He said he'd see what he could do."

"I don't need his charity."

"It's not charity if he's paying you."

Her eyes were different, he thought. They had a quiet, private look to them that wasn't there before.

Beau kissed her neck. "You worry too much. Everything will be fine."

The old man came walking down the road. He had on khaki pants and a pressed shirt. He saw Eldeen and Beau, and made his way over to them. Eldeen smiled. The old man held out his hand to Beau.

"Clifford Benderhoff," he said. Beau shook his hand.

"Beau," he said.

“Lovely night.”

“Yeah.”

“Just out taking my constitutional.”

“Right.”

Mr. Benderhoff shifted his focus from Beau to Eldeen. “Well, good night,” he said.

“Good night,” said Eldeen.

Mr. Benderhoff went briskly across to his own trailer.

“He talks like a professor, doesn’t he?” asked Eldeen.

“If you say so.”

“He used to teach college, you know. He told me so that first day.”

Beau snorted. Someone was pulling Eldeen’s good leg. No one who used to teach college would end up living in a trailer. Beau didn’t know why the old man would say such a thing to her, and figured he might be a little loopy after all.

After that, Eldeen looked out for Mr. Benderhoff. She brought him bland casseroles and cheese bakes, stuff Beau couldn’t imagine a guy with no teeth would manage, given how hard and chewy everything Eldeen made was.

“What makes you think he has no teeth?” Eldeen asked. She was at the sink in a sleeveless top with a little lace collar that made her look cute.

“So, he’s got teeth. How come you gotta feed him all the time?”

“Hon. It was last Tuesday, Thursday, and today.”

Beau scratched his chin. He was growing a beard. Eldeen said once that she liked beards.

“Where’s his family to feed him?” he asked.

“Widower. Daughter all the way out in California.”

“He should move out there. Old people need lots of sunshine.”

“He’s not that old. Just seventy-two.”

“That’s pretty old, if you ask me.”

Her expression said she wasn’t asking him, and wouldn’t.

\* \* \* \*

The first time Eldeen visited Mr. Benderhoff, he said she should call him Cliff, short for Clifford. He invited her to sit in a chair by the living room window. Nearby two other chairs were wrapped in old blankets. Boxes were stacked against the far wall, and a robust ivy plant sat on the kitchen table and trailed down to the floor. Cliff saw where she was looking and explained that he’d had the plant for many years and had taken it with him every time he moved. She asked why he moved so often, and the slow wandering of his clear blue eyes, as if he were struggling to make sense of his new home, said he was lonely. Eldeen understood about loneliness. It had been hard having Beau overseas. He was gone a total of four years, with only one visit home in between. Then she found that in some ways she was lonelier after he returned than before. She thought it was a matter of getting used to one way of life, then having to get used to another one all over again. Cliff offered a cup of coffee which she declined. The next visit she accepted, and on the third he asked if it were too early in the day for a small whiskey. She didn’t think it was. By then Cliff had arranged his things in a very homey way. The kitchen table had red placemats. The trailing ivy now sat atop

the entertainment center and reached its way towards the light from the nearest window. The two wrapped chairs were gone and replaced with a new sofa. A round coffee table stood in front covered with neatly laid out magazines whose titles Eldeen had never seen, *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Economist*, and one she did know, *Arizona Highways*. Eldeen asked if Cliff had been to Arizona and he said, yes indeed, several times. He was looking at a little place out there where he'd go for good, as soon as some of his investments came due in the fall. Though Eldeen had only known him for a week or two, she was sad to think he'd be gone that soon.

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Beau's friend Ty lifted his beer and took a long swig. The backs of his hands were spotted with orange, red, blue, and black. His head, which was shaved, had dots of green. Beau tried to think how paint had ended up there and didn't ask. Ty was working on another canvas, a deep swirling thing that had no beginning and no end. Beau thought it wasn't so hard to do, throwing paint around like that.

"Old lady with the geezer again?" Ty asked.

"Yup."

Ty burped, leaned back on the sofa, stared at the ceiling and said, "You should give her a kid."

Beau had had the same thought. A kid would keep Eldeen at home, where she belonged. This attachment to the old man was just her needing to take care of someone. Beau could take of himself, so he wasn't a good substitute. Women needed to nurture and

tend. If he couldn't talk her into a kid, then he'd suggest a puppy. If she didn't want a puppy, then she could plant a garden.

"Guy got any money?" asked Ty.

"Who?"

"The geezer."

"Doubt it."

"That's his Cadillac over there, right?"

"So?"

"Looks pretty late-model to me."

Beau finished his beer. He had an urge to throw the bottle at their old television set. "Why the interest in his assets?" he asked.

"Well, if he's as cultured as the old lady says, maybe he'd like to buy one of my paintings."

Having those crazy, loud swirls of color in such a small space would be a lot to take. Beau said he didn't really think so and got them both another beer.

\* \* \* \*

Finally Beau had to tell Eldeen to stop talking so much about the old man. She was always going on about how interesting he was and how many places he'd been. Beau said if that were so, then why didn't he take himself off for a long visit somewhere? Eldeen resented that Beau treated Cliff as if he were a nuisance when he was anything but. And it wasn't as if she were neglecting anything there at home. Wasn't his dinner always made and his clothes always washed? Weren't the rugs vacuumed and the dishes always done? And wasn't she bringing in a paycheck when he wasn't even looking for work? It was the way



she was leaning so defiantly on her crutch that made Beau see he had to do something, so he invited her to dinner at Madeleine's.

"Oh, my god, did you get a job?" she asked. She *ka-thumped* her way across their tiny living room and put her arms around him in a three-way hug—her, him, the crutch, which fell to the floor. He accepted her embrace. Her face was shiny and full of light.

"No," he said.

"So, why..."

"Can't I do something nice for my own wife once in a while?" He hadn't meant to sound defensive. She picked up her crutch.

"That's a pricey place. Are you sure it's a good idea?" she asked.

"It's a *great* idea. Now, do you want to go or not?"

"Of course I do, Pumpkin. It'll be awesome."

And it was, until Beau had too much to drink. He was a beer man, unused to hard liquor, and while Eldeen sipped her Bordeaux, Beau downed the whiskey sours. He got giggly, romantic, and surly, all in a row. Then he apologized at length in the truck as Eldeen piloted them through the country darkness. Part of the restaurant's charm was that it was out of the way, in a restored farm house that had once been owned by one of county's wealthiest families. Beau reminded her of this as they drove, then leaned against the window and fell asleep.

Back at the trailer, he snored in his seat. Eldeen couldn't wake him. It was late, she was tired and put out by his behavior that evening, though the food had been awfully good. She'd ordered a beef dish she couldn't pronounce and found it one of the tastiest

things she'd ever eaten. She nudged Beau again with no luck. She thought of poking him hard with the rubber tip of her crutch. She didn't want to leave him there all night in case it got chilly, which it probably wouldn't, but still, it didn't seem right.

The lights were on in Cliff's trailer. Eldeen made her way over, knocked, waited, and then knocked again. Cliff came to the door and said he'd been reading on his chair and must have dropped off. She explained the problem.

"Oh, my dear, what a bother for you! Of course, I'll be right over," Cliff said.

He took a moment to get out of his frayed blue bathrobe and into a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. The jeans were a surprise. He looked good, she thought, strong and capable. Just the other day he'd mentioned that he still went to the gym three days a week and worked with weights. Eldeen admired him for wanting to stay in shape.

Cliff wrestled Beau out of the truck, leaned him on his shoulder, and walked him to the front door.

"Oops," Beau said. "Oopsie-doopsie."

Cliff guided Beau down the hall to their bedroom and shoved him onto the bed. Then he lifted his legs off the floor and got him in the middle, away from the edge.

"Hey, Baby, what say you get naked, get in here, and give your old man a blowjob?" Beau mumbled.

Eldeen's face burned. Cliff pretended he hadn't heard a thing. Back in the living room he said, "Don't be hard on him in the morning. He'll feel rotten enough." Eldeen noticed that she'd stained her dress at the restaurant. It wasn't a new dress, but it was one

of her favorites, a little yellow jersey with embroidered roses around the neck. She stepped out of her white sandals, wriggled free of her crutch and sat down. Cliff sat down, too, on the sofa opposite her. The propped up crutch fell loudly to the floor. Cliff reached for it.

“It’s okay. Just leave it there,” said Eldeen.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you—”

“Happened when I was six. Fell off a horse I had no business trying to ride. Broke the damn thing so badly, there wasn’t a thing anyone could do about it. Not out where we lived, anyway, in the boondocks.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry. I was going to ask how long you’ve been married.”

Eldeen smiled and put her hand on her forehead.

“Oh, right. Seven years. Why?”

Cliff took a minute to answer. Beau’s snores were deep and strong. “Marriage isn’t always easy, or intended to always make us happy. It’s companionship that counts. As long as you’re good companions most of the time.”

Eldeen said nothing.

“My wife was a good companion, even when she didn’t understand me,” said Cliff.

“What didn’t she understand?”

“My wanting to feel young again, and explore the world.”

“Oh.”

“She thought I was—avoiding reality.” The shadow of past conversations passed over his face. “So, I practiced. Reality, I mean. That’s why I told you right away that I was seventy-two. To get used to how it sounds.”

“Are you? Used to it?”

“No.”

“Well, you know what they say. ‘You’re as young as you feel.’” Down the hall Beau turned in bed and mumbled something.

“Can I offer you a nightcap?” Cliff asked.

“Well—” Oh, who cares? she thought. Beau wouldn’t wake up until mid-morning, at the earliest.

“That would be lovely,” she said. They walked across the road in the silver light of the August moon, and as they climbed the stairs, he patted her shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Ty watched the barmaid’s ass as she wove around the crowded tables. For once his hands were clean. He was in a good mood. He’d actually sold a painting, to a friend of his mother’s, which wasn’t quite as exciting as selling in a gallery to a stranger, but it was a start. Now he and Beau were celebrating. After the hangover from Madeleine’s, Beau had stopped drinking for four days. Today was Friday, and he was ready to pick up where he’d left off.

One of Beau’s neighbors, the retired cop, came in with a woman a lot younger than he was. Ty looked up.

“Hey, you know who that chick is? She’s a stripper,” said Ty.

“No fucking way.”

“Way. I saw her at Tattler’s once.”

“Since when you hang around strip clubs?”

“Always looking for inspiration, you know?”

The retired cop looked at Beau, then leaned over and whispered something in the stripper’s ear that

made her giggle and bring her hand to her mouth. Maybe he'd seen him the night he came home from Madeleine's, flopped against the old man like a sack of flour, as Eldeen put it. So what if he had? What if Beau had gotten blotto? Mr. Law and Order looked like a guy who did that a lot.

After a couple of minutes Ty asked, "Old lady with her charity again, is she?" Beau nodded. It was really getting to be too much. He'd decided that Eldeen didn't need a kid, but to work in a nursing home so she could play checkers and listen to stupid stories about the good old days. What the hell was wrong with her, anyway?

"She's unhappy," he said. It had come to his mind suddenly and explained everything.

"About what?"

"Don't know."

"That's bad. Unhappy women make unhappy men."

"Where did you get that?"

"I made it up."

"You're full of crap."

"Hey, you tell me I'm wrong."

Ty had a point. Eldeen *had* made him unhappy. And it was all because of Pops over there across the street. Beau would talk to him and suggest that maybe Eldeen shouldn't visit so much, that she needed to be with people her own age. But then he'd just sound like a fool. Eldeen was going to have to come around on her own. With a little encouragement, of course.

"Give me forty bucks," said Beau. "No, better make it fifty."

"What for?"

“Roses. I’m getting Eldeen a dozen red roses.”

“Buy them yourself.”

“Can’t.”

“Jesus. I treated you to rounds all afternoon, now you want more from me?”

“It’s a loan, that’s all.”

Ty stared into his beer. Then he reached for his wallet, removed two twenties and a ten.

“Come with me. Help me figure out what to write on the card,” said Beau.

“How about, *with love, from your deadbeat hubby.*”

“Fuck off, will you?”

But Ty went along, steered Beau towards pink roses when the red weren’t available, saying that yellow or white weren’t romantic enough, and told Beau to write *To the love of my life, lovely as these are, your beauty far outweighs.* Beau thought it sounded stupid, but he wrote it anyway, word for word.

\* \* \* \*

Eldeen blushed when she saw the flowers, and her eyes went big and bright, like a kid’s. She read the card. Her mouth turned down. She patted Beau’s arm, then limped into the bedroom. He heard her crying. He had no idea what to do. How could he comfort her because she was embarrassed at his gift? Where was his *You’re so good to me, I never should have neglected you, and I promise to do right by you from now on?*

For a few days, Eldeen didn’t visit the old man. Then she mentioned that he’d gone out of town.

“Elks convention?” Beau asked.

“Stop it.”

“Where, then?”

“He has a friend in Pittsburgh.”

“Bet they’re painting the town red. Closing the bars. Hitting all the hot spots.”

Eldeen’s mouth pulled into a narrow line. She sat down, picked up one of his socks that needed mending from a wicker basket she kept by the couch, looked at it, and threw it to the floor.

“What’s your problem?” Beau asked. He didn’t think it was her period. That had been the week before. Maybe she was coming down with something. Whatever it was, he hoped it wasn’t catching.

She closed her eyes for a moment. “I’m sorry. Look, I’ve been thinking. If you can’t find a job, why not take a class at the community college? The recession won’t last forever, and in the meantime you can learn something new,” she said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Computers. Cliff says—”

“I don’t give a shit what Cliff says.”

Beau went outside to mow the lawn. He’d mowed it only two days ago, but he needed something to do, and it was too early for a beer. He thought about visiting Ty in the garage he used as a studio, but Ty was pretty weird when he was working, so he kept pushing the mower back and forth.

\* \* \* \*

The kids that belonged to the family in the trailer park were running around, playing tag. When they

saw Beau sitting on his stairs, they stopped. Their four heads came together in a huddle, then they exploded with laughter and ran away.

*Assholes*, Beau thought. He was in a lousy mood. Eldeen was out again, he didn't know where. The truck was gone. She hadn't left a note. She used to, all the time, but now she came and went without a word. Beau had no idea what he'd done to make her this way.

A few days later, Eldeen came in from outside, stood in the kitchen, and said she was leaving. She was going to Arizona with Cliff. She and Cliff were in love. She knew Beau thought she was crazy, she knew he didn't understand, that all he saw when he looked at Cliff was an old man. His body might be old, but his spirit was young, and his soul timeless. Those were her exact words. Cliff made her feel what she'd never felt before, that she mattered, that she could belong to someone without feeling owned and all used up. Beau sat on the couch in silence while she went on and on in a calm, even voice, waiting for her to say it was a joke, that she was getting him back for something and wanted to teach him a lesson.

She stopped talking for a minute, maybe to give him a chance to speak. He realized then that she'd been standing the whole time, leaning so hard on her crutch that her knuckles were white.

"You feeding him Viagra or something? I didn't think guys that age could still get it up," said Beau.

"You're disgusting."

*"I'm disgusting."*

Eldeen said that Cliff was better in bed than Beau was. He'd had lots more practice, knew what women needed. Beau's head was in his hands by then. She



had another confession to make. She'd been at Cliff's house one afternoon when Beau was out and the neighbor kids must have heard them in the bedroom, because all of a sudden, there they were, with one heaved up on the shoulder of another, giggling and laughing. She realized then that she couldn't go on, sneaking around, that she had to come clean.

"Clean isn't the word I'd use," said Beau. It was dreamlike now. None of this was really happening. She asked him to try to understand, to see that they'd been over since he'd come back from Iraq, that in time he'd be happier without her.

And then she was gone. Her *ka-thump ka-thump* went down the stairs, across the street, followed by the slam of car doors, and the slow acceleration of a very big, very strong motor.

He said her name. He said it again, and remembered the gun. He went to look. She'd left it right there, in the bedside table. He picked it up. There was still time. They had quite a while before they hit the interstate. He moved the gun from one hand to the other and knew it would be easy and right, that he would do it in a second without thinking twice, if only he could figure what to do after that.

# Creation

---

by Margaret Finnegan

The usual geniuses had red and blue first-place ribbons on their science fair boards. The usual geniuses themselves stood in front of these testimonies to their brilliance and wore the nonchalant confidence of the high achieving.

Willie—not being a usual genius—did not have a ribbon on his board. Like the rest of the rabble, he stood by his board in lonely silence. Occasionally, he pulled at the too-large tie his mother made him wear and, when he thought no one was watching, gazed at passing girls.

The mother of a boy he'd played with in elementary school came up to him. "Willie! Look how big you've grown. I wouldn't have known you but for the name on your board."

"Hello, Mrs. Kleeve."

"Don't you love the science fair? What's your project? Show me."

Willie pointed to a box standing on a table. The box was full of sand. In one corner there was a pool of water, and, in another corner, there were some plants that looked like corn. In a third corner, an earth-colored blob kept banging against the side of the box.

Mrs. Kleeve crinkled her brow in the good-natured way that mothers of usual geniuses do. "Hmm. What have we here?"

Willie fiddled with the knot of his tie and looked down at his shoes. It took all his strength not to melt away like ice cream. It was just so embarrassing. His project was so simplistic; he saw that now. It was something a kindergartner could have done. No wonder he hadn't won anything. "It's a carbon-based life form," he said.

Mrs. Kleeve bent down and took a closer look at the blob. "Really? I haven't seen one of these in ages. Very unpredictable, aren't they? Still, there's always something to be learned from them. What's your question?"

"Given self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence, what will a carbon-based life form do?"

"And your conclusion?"

"Bang constantly against the side of a box."

Mrs. Kleeve straightened up and laughed. Willie felt his face grow hot. "Like I said," she said, "very unpredictable."

"Well, it was nice seeing you, Willie. You should come visit Howard sometime. I'm sure he'd love that."

Willie watched her walk over to Howard and his red- and blue-ribboned board. God, he hated Howard. God, he hated everything to do with Howard, including his mother and his ribbon and his stupid self-contained expandable galaxy.

He looked over at his blob and frowned. He flicked the side of the box and sent a tremor running through it. The blob froze and then fell to the ground and gnashed its little teeth. Jeez. These were the stupidest life forms ever.

Mary Ellen Dilbeck slid up beside him. He felt her long hair graze his back. Willie liked Mary Ellen. She wasn't a usual genius for one thing. She was just a

normal girl—normal, not ugly, and nice to him, which was a pretty much unbeatable combination. Plus, her breath smelled like the Red Hots she always sucked on. It made him a little dizzy, but he liked it.

“You see Howard Kleeve’s board,” she whispered with a roll of the eyes.

Willie shook his head.

“It’s covered with equations and twelve-syllable words. He’s so full of himself. And, of course, he’s advancing to State. Ten bucks say Bello nominated Kleeve before he even saw his board. I say, if no one can pronounce some loser dude’s title, the dude definitely shouldn’t win anything.”

Willie nodded. He tried to think of something clever to say, but all he came up with was, “Totally.”

“What’d you do?” he added.

Mary Ellen pulled out the wand of her lip gloss and applied it without even looking. “Something lame,” she said. “How about you?”

He pointed to the box. “Carbon-based life form.”

She bent down and peered inside. “Ah... it’s so cute. Biped. That’s advanced.”

Willie bent down next to her. “Not advanced enough. Bello gave me a fricking B-.”

Mary Ellen rolled her eyes again. “Mr. Bello is such a prick. I like your biped.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She put her hand in the box and picked up the blob—then she dropped it. “Gross. It peed on me.”

“It’s got issues.”

“Why?”

“It has self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence.”

Mary Ellen stood up. Her mouth was wide open and her face was turning kind of purple, and it wasn't a good purple. It was a bad purple, a judging purple, the kind of purple girls' faces turned when teachers gave them bad grades and were forevermore cursed as evil.

"That's so mean," Mary Ellen said. "It's scared." She ran a finger across the back of the blob. "Poor thing."

"Just because it's self-aware doesn't mean it has feelings," said Willie, sounding sulky when he meant to sound funny. He smiled at Mary Ellen to try and make her understand, but that just made her purple face shine neon.

"It may not have feelings like we do, but it still has some sort of emotions."

Now it was Willie's turn to roll his eyes. "I doubt it," he said, which was exactly the moment he knew he had truly blown it.

Mary Ellen's mouth dropped even wider, and then she just walked away, just straight away, sending her long hair rustling in outrage.

Willie banged his head against the table. Then he banged it again and again. When he stood up his friend Martin was staring at his blob. "Dude," said Martin. "Why is your carbon-based life form humping the box?"

Willie looked over at the blob. He nodded. "Ahhhhh."

\* \* \* \*

That night, even though the science fair was over and Willie was stuck with the fucking B-, he started to

make another blob. His mother said, “What are you doing? You haven’t even finished your math homework.”

“It won’t take long,” said Willie.

“It better not. Math matters, you know. Math gives you options. Universities look at math grades more than anything else. Howard Kleeve is being recruited by top-tier schools—and he’s fourteen.”

Willie grunted.

“And you know why?” said his mother. “Because he’s good at math, and he works hard. His mother told me he spends four hours a night studying math.

Blah, blah, blah, heard Willie. Blah, blah, blah. Howard ass-kissing Kleeve. Blah, blah, blah.

Willie took his carbon polymer clay and rolled it in his hands until it became warm and the brown mixture began to stick to his hands. Then, with his fingers, he formed the clay into another biped blob, a little smaller this time, about the size of his fist. The blob yawned, as if awakened from a long dream, and it stretched out its pudgy limbs. Willie gave it self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence and watched as little drops of salt water leaked out of its eyes.

He deposited the new blob on the other side of the box from the old blob and let them eye each other from across the distance.

Sometime later, after Willie finished his homework and watched a little TV, he went back to the basement to check on the blobs. Right away, he could tell something was wrong. Something red was smeared all over the sand. The pool of water was tinted pink, and the new blob lay floating on top of it, dead.

“No,” sighed Willie. He picked up the new blob between his thumb and forefinger and placed it face up in the sand. Its skin had gone gray, and its eyes looked like glass, and even though it was just a blob, Willie felt his skin crawl.

Then it dawned on him: Where was the other blob? His eyes followed the smear of red back to the old blob’s corner, but the blob wasn’t there. No, the blob wasn’t there at all, but a little way down—toward the corn—there was more red. Willie’s eyes followed the color to a barely vibrating quiver of corn stalks. He pushed aside the plants. There was the blob, trembling and leaking salt water and making strange, soft, guttural sounds.

“What did you do?” whispered Willie. “You killed it.”

The blob trembled and leaked, trembled and leaked.

Well, this is ridiculous, thought Willie. These blobs are the worst blobs ever. Clearly, they can’t handle any advanced psychological variables. Clearly, advanced psychological variables make the blobs go fricking nuts. That’s what he should have told Mr. Bello. That’s what he should have written on the board. Jeez. What fricking messes these blobs were. No wonder no one ever experimented with them anymore.

Enough was enough. This experiment was over. Willie picked up the smooth stone used as the basement doorstep and prepared to smash the blob. He lifted the stone high above his head. With a thud it hit the sand, sending grainy particles sailing in all directions. But the blob had moved. It had eluded the stone and now the blob was on its feet, running from side to side, tripping in the sand and standing up

again and running some more. Its moan morphed into a shrill scream.

Willie watched the blob, its panicked arms flailing. He put the stone back by the door and regarded the blob some more. It was over at the wall now, pounding, pressing, jumping, looking for some means of escape.

Willie stood transfixed. He had never seen anything so pathetically desperate and frantic. Frankly, it freaked him out and made him want to eat pudding or ice cream. He'd even settle for stale, store-bought cookies. Didn't he have some stale, store-bought cookies? Hadn't he seen some in the cupboard? He would check it out. He would look for the cookies, eat them all, and then come back and kill the blob. Or maybe he would just kill the blob in the morning when it had calmed down. Absolutely. That was a much better plan. He would kill the blob in the morning. Decided, he turned off the basement light and left the screaming blob in the dark.

\* \* \* \*

Willie did not kill the blob in the morning. He slept in and his mom woke him yelling, "Hurry up! You'll be late! Blah, blah, blah." After school he had marching band and homework. Plus, he had a couple of big tests to study for. So it was three days before he had time to deal with the blob. Even then, it was sort of an afterthought. He was looking for his gym shoes and went down to the basement to see if they were there.

They weren't. It almost seemed like the blob had been waiting for him. It fell down on its knees and



started rocking back and forth. Willie bent his face toward the blob. The blob fell prostrate onto the sand.

“At least you’ve calmed down,” said Willie.

Willie almost had to laugh. These carbon-based life forms. Too funny.

“Ok, little guy,” said Willie. “If it’s that important to you. But you can’t be this pathetic. That’s just sad.”

Willie looked at the blob and thought. “How about this?” he said. He put his hand on the blob and pinched off a bit of clay. He rolled it in his hand, spit on it, added some more clay, and worked with it until he had another blob. This time, when the new blob began to leak salt water, Willie put the new blob down right next to the first blob and stroked its head, gently.

When the first blob lifted its stubby arms to attack the new blob, Willie made a barrier with his hand. Then he stroked both blobs on the top of their heads. The old blob made another move to attack. Willie made another barrier with his hand and then stroked both heads.

The new blob toddled over to the old blob. It put its hand on the old blob’s head and stroked it. The old blob froze. Little bumps popped up from its skin. It stepped back, confused. Then, tentatively, it took small, crouching steps toward the new blob. It ran a stubby hand on the new blob’s waist. It brought its stubby nose close to the new blob and smelled. It ran its nose over the surface of the blob and something seemed to click in the old blob, something seemed to happen, and the blob ran faster and faster in circles around the new blob, touching and smelling it, until, suddenly, the old blob fell to its knees and wrapped its arms around the new blob, contented.

“All right,” said Willie with satisfaction. “There you go.” And he turned off the light and went in search of his shoes.

\* \* \* \*

A week later, Willie checked in on the blobs. A third blob was now in the box.

“Cool,” whispered Willie.

“No way,” said Martin when Willie told him. “You made a reproducible carbon-based life form? That’s, like, really hard. You should have done that for your science fair project.”

“I know,” said Willie. “Even Bello would have to give me an A for that.”

“Bello’s head would explode for that.”

By lunch, Willie was a god. Everybody knew about his reproducing blobs. Everybody knew what an amazing thing he had done and what a usual genius he actually was. Everybody wanted to come see the reproducing blobs, but Willie’s mother would have none of it.

“I don’t want a bunch of kids, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...” she said.

Still, Martin came, and then a few other kids came, so at least people knew that Willie wasn’t making things up. He really had done something cool. He really did deserve everyone’s praise.

Well, everyone’s praise but Mary Ellen Dilbeck’s. Mary Ellen did not praise Willie. Mary Ellen wouldn’t even talk to Willie.

“She still thinks you’re mean,” said Martin. “She’s telling everyone that it’s bad enough to give one blob

self awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence, but to give it to a whole species is just evil.”

“Species? It’s three blobs.”

Within weeks, however, it wasn’t three blobs. It was seventy-five blobs. Then ninety-two blobs. Then one hundred and twenty blobs. With each passing day there were more and more blobs. Blobs filled the box. More than that, they wrecked havoc on the box—on each other. They fought over water. They fought over corn. They fought over blobs, over even the fricking sand, which was everywhere, which was worthless.

Willie would enter the room. He’d turn on the light. His shadow would pass over them. Only then would they stop their reproducing, their fighting, their weeping of salty tears and gnashing of tiny teeth. Only then would they still themselves and begin to tremble and bow, tremble and bow. Only then would there be peace. But then Willie would turn around, his shadow would lift, and—and wham!—and blobs would go fricking nuts all over again.

“Unpredictable.” That’s what Mrs. Kleeve had called them, and that’s what they were. That’s exactly what they were. But that was just the beginning. The blobs were dangerous. They were greedy and selfish. Yes, true, sometimes Willie witnessed intimate gestures of love and kindness. Mothers cradled babies. Strangers shared food, but that was nothing, that was incomparable to the constant grief they bestowed on one another. They beat each other for corn. They murdered for sand—fricking sand! They were obsessed with their own survival. It was as if they thought they were some valuable commodity, some precious gift, when they were a fricking

science project. And not even a good science project: a B- science project.

It was enough to make Willie want to destroy the lot of them. "I mean, I don't even like them anymore," Willie told Martin. "They're totally annoying, and they take so much time. Every day I'm in there building onto the box, throwing them loaves of bread that they just fight over."

"Then get rid of them. There just blobs."

Willie sighed. He knew. He knew they were just blobs. He knew they were just ephemeral short-lived whispers. But they depended on him. "If I adopt a dog," said Willie. "I can't just take it back to the pound if it pees on my carpet."

"Sure you can," said Martin. "People do it all the time."

"I made the blobs," said Willie. "I'm responsible for the blobs."

Martin shrugged. "Whatever."

Willie's mother was less easygoing. "Those blobs have to go," she told him. "They are stinking up the basement. I'm telling you, they smell. It's disgusting down there."

"Carbon-based life forms have simple excretory systems. It's their physiology," explained Willie.

"There are excretory systems and there is putrescence. Those blobs are putrescent. I want them out of the basement."

"They've got to live somewhere."

"Why? Why do they have to live somewhere? This was a science fair project. The science fair is over. And—since we are on the subject—let me say this. They take too much time. Do you think Howard Kleeve is

spending all his hours babysitting carbon-based life forms? No. Howard Kleeve is studying math. Blobs are not going to get you into a good college, Willie.”

Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Just fricking shut up already, thought Willie.

“Out of the basement, Willie. Out of the house.”

“Ok. Ok.” Jeez. Like he needed this too.

He went down to the basement. He stared down at the blobs. He watched as they stopped what they were doing. He watched as they trembled and bowed.

“What am I going to do with you?” he said. “You’re a lot a trouble, you know that?” Then he picked up some screaming baby blob covered in sand and shit and handed it to its screaming mother looking for it in the cornfield.

At school now, Willie did nothing but worry about the blobs. He couldn’t kill them, but he couldn’t just let them spread their nasty pink blood everywhere either. And now he had to get them out of the basement too. Where the hell was he going to put these stupid blobs? What the hell was he going to do? It was too much. It was too much for one boy to deal with. At lunch, he dropped his head onto his lunch bag and kept it there even when his neck began to hurt.

The smell of Red Hots made him look up. There sat Mary Ellen. Right next to him. She didn’t look at him. Instead, she stared across the lunchroom. With a placid face that belied her biting voice, she said, “I hear you’ve got over three hundred of those blobs now. It’s not right, you know.”

He dropped his head back onto his lunch bag and felt his stomach sink down to his knees. “I know.”

“You should do something.”

He looked up to find her green eyes locked on his. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You’ve got to destroy them. That’s all you can do. With the knowledge you’ve given them, they must be constantly suffering. They must be constantly miserable. No primitive life form can live like that. They’ll go mad. They’ll kill each other.”

Willie gave her a shifty-eyed glance and looked back down.

“Oh. So they’ve gone mad already. Well, you really messed up, didn’t you?”

Willie nodded. “I can’t destroy them,” he said. “They want to live. They’re so scared. They’re so afraid. All the time they’re afraid.”

“That’s why you have to destroy them.”

“No,” said Willie. “There has to be another way.”

Mary Ellen stared out across the lunchroom again. “I used to like you.”

The stomach in Willie’s knees dropped down to his toes, leaving an enormous black void in his entire body. “I’ll fix it,” he muttered.

Mary Ellen walked away.

If only there were a way to fix it, he thought.

\* \* \* \*

When Willie got home the blobs were in full-scale revolt. The ones by the pool of water were throwing stones at a group wearing corn-silk necklaces. They didn’t even stop when Willie looked down at them. They didn’t even stop when he bent so close that he could see the blush on their cheeks and the gleam of their gnashing teeth. “Stop,” he said. But they didn’t

stop. “Stop,” he said again, this time shaking the box with his hands so that the blobs all fell over. And they did stop. They stopped and looked up at Willie. They stopped and started to tremble and bow, but then one of the blobs stabbed a sharp stick into another. Blood squirted like water from a toy gun. It splattered the blob with the stick, and the blobs raged and screamed and attacked one another once more.

Willie fell back. He shook his head. He squinted and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “I don’t know what to do,” he whimpered. “Someone tell me what to do.”

\* \* \* \*

Willie’s mother found him in the basement, slouched in a corner staring up at the box, his fingers pulling hard on his hair.

“What’s this about?” she asked in a voice she didn’t use much anymore, a voice she’d used more when Willie was small, when everything she said didn’t sound like blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

He nodded at the blobs. “I don’t know what to do with them. I created them. I owe them, but they’re so...unpredictable.”

“It’s not like they have real feelings,” she said gently.

He twisted his neck back and forth and his face contorted in pain. “They have feelings,” he said. “They suffer. They want to live.”

She went and peered into the box. Her nose twitched and the corners of her mouth pulled down in revulsion. She looked at Willie. “Do you want me to take care of this for you?”

He looked closely at his mother. He remembered when she did things for him. He remembered when he trusted her for everything. “Don’t kill them,” he whispered.

She straightened her back and crossed her arms. “Leave it to me.”

He tilted his head. Not sure he wanted an answer, he stuttered, “Wh-what will you do?”

“Remember the farm we took Blackie to when we couldn’t take care of him anymore? They take mistakes like this too. It’s a nice place. They’ll be happy there. Like Blackie.”

Willie felt his soul shrink inside him, and he nodded.

\* \* \* \*

He was watching television and eating his second bowl of ice cream when she came home. She had a sort of sweaty, windblown look about her, and her shoes were covered in mud. He watched her pull them off one by one and drop them by the front door. Then he looked back at the TV, which was showing people in a house. The people, he couldn’t place them, but they were talking and their words seemed hollow, far away, like in a fever.

She came and sat next to him, and when she did, she reached over, gave his thigh two quick pats, and then started laughing and nodding at the TV. He heard her, but he didn’t. It was like the TV. So far away. He felt tears collect around his eyes, and he was so afraid they would leak out, so he blinked them back and stared hard at the people. Yes. He recognized them now. They were the funny people. The



people he liked. The people who made him laugh. He took a bite of ice cream. Of course. He could tell now. He could tell what the funny people were saying. They were saying funny things. Very funny things. He would think about the funny things. He would laugh at the funny things. Like her. He would laugh, and she would laugh, and he would eat another bowl of ice cream. And that's how he would do this. For as long as it took. And he would never go into the basement again.

# Ramadan, Jihad, and Azad

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by Bilal Ibne Rasheed

After having translated a short story of Manto's into English, Azad relaxed for a while and then took out an English translation of Chekhov's short stories. He adjusted his posture, made some room for his feet on the study table by pushing the heap of books aside and busied himself with reading Chekhov. Immersed in reading, he didn't notice the sound of a blowing horn outside his room.

By the door of Azad's faculty-hostel room sat a brand-new Land Cruiser. Its CD player recited the Holy Quran and on the driving seat sat Haji Sharif-ud-Din Sahib blowing the horn. Haji sahib, a colleague of Azad's, thought he was not in the room when he did not turn up after his blowing of horn for two complete minutes. Just about to leave, Haji sahib thought of leaving a note for Azad to register his visit. So he locked the vehicle, crossed the ten-meter footpath, and pushed the door open only to see Azad adsorbed in reading.

Haji sahib had never imagined anyone so lost in reading that they could ignore the sound of the horn of his SUV.

*"Assalam o Alaikum,"* a frustrated Haji sahib said in an Arabic accent.

Azad turned to the left where Haji sahib stood dressed in an exquisite white shalwar-suit, a dark

black waist-coat and an equally black turban. His shalwar was well above his ankles. Smelling of an imported fragrance Haji sahib was holding a Tasbeeh in his right hand.

“*Wa-alaikum assalam*, Haji sahib...” replied Azad. He was about to continue but Haji sahib cut him off.

“I’ve blown the hell out of the horn of my car but you seem to take no damn notice.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry Haji sahib,” continued Azad after a slight pause. “Actually, I was reading Chekhov and was trying to analyze his influence on Manto as he had translated Chekhov into Urdu. And Haji sahib, you know, all those who come to see me are mostly students of English language and literature who come on foot. That’s why, probably, I’m not used to responding to horns. Anyways, I’m sorry once again.” Azad was all apologies.

“*Astaghfirullah, astaghfirullah*. So you’ve read this provocative pornographer and boozer, Manto?” Haji sahib asked, sitting on Azad’s bed.

“Of course Haji sahib, ignoring Manto would be a huge mistake for any student of literature. He was a great short story writer and I think no writer is provocative. They just try to portray the society and...”

“One doesn’t become a great writer boozing all life and talking about prostitutes.” Haji sahib continued, “Forget about this bullshit. Actually I have come to tell you that tomorrow is the first of Ramadan and, as always, we’ve arranged for the recitation of the Holy Quran in Taraweeh in the university mosque. I want you to come and join us in...”

Haji sahib would have continued but was interrupted by his mobile phone’s beep.

“Yes, what happened now?” Haji sahib answered in a sharp tone. “Yar, I’ve told this asshole to hold the flour. It will go up, but this motherfucker doesn’t understand. The government is keeping flour at 30 and we are selling at 35. Do you think this is profit?” Haji sahib scolded but the caller persisted.

“Ghani, you bloody well tell Rahim to lock the forty thousand tons of flour in *godowns* and go to the village for a week. In some days it will, *inshallah*, go up.”

Once more the caller tried in vain to convince Haji sahib whose temper was about to cross the threshold.

“You tell Rahim that his American MBA won’t work in Pakistan. I’ve been in this business for the last ten years and there hadn’t been even a single Ramadan when rates have not gone up. Our *abba jan marhoom* did the same whole his life. One of the first lessons he taught me was to hold the flour at the start of Ramadan and then wait for Allah’s blessings.”

But this is damn profiteering and hoarding, and why would Allah bless such an evil deed? Azad thought. And then why would anyone like Haji sahib do this? After all, he is a wealthy businessman, a lecturer in Islamiyat, and also the head of a religious organization comprising youth of the university which preaches Islamic teachings to the students. But Azad’s mind didn’t help him. Probably, he was too busy locating Chekhovian shades in Manto’s writings.

“Oh yar, I would’ve come myself but this year I’ve to listen to the recitation of the Quran in Taraweeh as a Saame. And you better tell Rahim to keep his damn mouth shut and don’t try to impress me with his American accented English. You lock the *godowns*

and go for Taraweeh. Tomorrow is the first of Ramadan. Moon has been sighted.”

Haji sahib terminated the call and addressed Azad who was standing in front of his bookshelf on which among other books Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* and the *Communist Manifesto* were sitting. While Haji sahib talked on the phone, Azad recalled a lengthy queue of working class people waiting for hours in front of a Utility Store to buy flour at Rs.30 per kg.

“I don’t know what the hell is wrong with our youth. They try to teach elders as if we are idiots and they have all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Bloody morons!” Haji sahib was exasperated.

“I don’t think so Haji sahib,” said Azad. “Actually, the new generation has different perceptions of life. They try to understand and analyze life in a different manner and are not afraid of experimenting. At times, their experiments appear...”

“To hell with this youth and their experiments. I was going for Taraweeh and thought to take you along.”

Oblivious of Haji sahib’s reaction Azad said, “Actually I no longer offer Taraweeh for because I don’t...”

“*La hola wala quwah!* What the hell are you saying! Taraweeh is *sunnat-e-muakkidah*. How can you leave it?” Haji sahib got annoyed.

“Of late, I don’t feel like saying prayers so I don’t go to the mosque just to fill in the blank.” Azad tried to justify.

“Allah has asked us to pray, whether you feel like it or not.” Haji sahib said in a pure mullah tone.

“You are very right but...” Azad was about to say something in his defence but was interrupted by the ringing of Haji sahib’s mobile phone.

“Who the hell is it now!” Haji sahib took out his mobile from the pocket of his shalwar and switched on the loudspeaker of the phone.

“What's it now?” Haji sahib seemed to be in a hurry. While listening to the caller he took out his wallet from his shalwar-pocket and produced a worn out piece of paper. Then he began dictating some numbers into the phone. “Don’t worry, I’ve transferred all the money from the local accounts to our Swiss account. These motherfuckers deduct *zakat* on the first of Ramadan.”

Haji sahib switched off his mobile phone. He was about to deliver a full-length lecture to Azad regarding the blessings of saying prayers but a look at the wall clock dissuaded him. Nine was about to be struck.

“I didn’t realize I am getting late. I should get going and you please do come for Taraweeh.”

Azad thought of asking Haji sahib to kindly explain the relationship between hoarding of thousands of tons of flour and non-payment of *zakat* with prayers. But before he was able to word his thoughts Haji sahib had left.

Azad heard the engine of the Land Cruiser roar. *Das Kapital* sat still and quiet on the bookshelf.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, the first of Ramadan, on his way to the classroom of MA English—2nd semester, Azad found three bearded young fellows engaged in a heated debate. They were trying to figure out whether one should consider eight *rakaa'ts* of Taraweeh authentic or twenty. Azad ignored them and went to his class.

Before commencing his lecture, Azad took a bird's eye view of his class of sixty-odd students and as always began the lecture at 8:30.

"Well, friends, today we'll talk about language and culture and their relationship." Azad spoke in his Pakistani-English accent.

Azad had just started his lecture when he found a small group of students, of relatively unfamiliar faces, standing by the door of the classroom. Before Azad could ask them the reason for their presence one of the girls excused herself and said, "Sorry for the interruption Azad sahib. We are from the departments of sociology and philosophy. We'd learnt about your today's lecture and wanted to attend it. Only if you don't mind."

"Be my guests." Said Azad.

"And apologies for being late." The girl said.

As the class was packed to its capacity, some of the boys vacated their seats for girls and stood at the back.

Halfway into his well-prepared lecture he found himself getting disturbed by the noise outside the classroom. He saw the same boys talking loudly still unable to decide the exact number of taraweeh. Azad sent one of his students to tell them that the lecture was in progress. When he came back, Azad's curiosity got the better of him.

"Which department?"

"Islamic Studies." the boy replied.

"So do they attend any classes or discuss trivialities all day long?" Azad asked.

"Sir, this is the class of Haji Sharif-ud-Din sahib and as usual he is not there."

For a moment Azad thought of sharing with the class Haji sahib's preaching of last night but then decided otherwise. Let's not waste this time, he thought and resumed his lecture.

“So, we see that language and culture are deeply and intricately related to each other. Our habits, ways of life, geography, and religion have a profound impact on our languages. For instance, we can see that the word ‘Ramadan’ has come from our religion. ‘Ramadan’ and ‘Eid’ are established institutions in our culture but we do not find these words in, say, Russian or Chinese or English as their cultures do not have these institutions. They instead have festivals like ‘Thanksgiving’ and ‘Easter’ and accordingly their languages have a repertoire regarding them.”

The mention of Ramadan triggered a young man to raise his hand.

“Yes, please,” said Azad.

“Do you fast, sir?”

“I don’t think my fasting has anything to do with the relationship of language and culture.”

The class laughed.

\* \* \* \*

After the class, Azad went to the staff room where he was greeted with a booming voice of Haji sahib who was lecturing in an aggressive and emotional tone. Azad found an empty chair and filled it.

“Dear brothers, how shameful it is that many of the faculty members don’t fast, especially those of the philosophy department. And I’ve also heard that our VC doesn’t fast either. All of them have gone atheists.”



Backbiting! Which kind of fast does Haji sahib fast? Azad thought.

Haji sahib was about to continue but Azad interrupted him, "Three of your boys, Haji sahib, are caught in a fix as to what is the exact number of Taraweeh. They need your help probably."

"Dear Azad sahib, actually the boys are not attending my *dars-e-Quran* after the *Zohr* prayers. That's why these differences are erupting among them."

"You may think of going to their class." Azad suggested humbly.

"Dear oh dear, the class timings are too early and my schedule doesn't permit me to take the class. So I try to compensate for it in my *dars*," Haji sahib explained.

What a peculiar way of discharging duties, Azad thought.

\* \* \* \*

On the first Sunday of the Ramadan, Azad got up late, took a frugal breakfast, and was sipping tea while browsing through a book when he heard the sound of a car. Haji sahib knocked at his door, didn't wait for the reply, and pushed it open. The very sight of Azad drinking tea on a Ramadan-day shocked Haji sahib.

"*Astaghfirullah, astaghfirullah*. So you don't fast," said an exasperated Haji Sahib.

Had Azad known about Haji sahib's arrival he would have prepared some reasonable excuse or at least would have hidden his cup. But Haji sahib's surprise arrival totally cornered him.

“No, Haji sahib, I don’t fast.” Azad said flatly.

“Azad sahib, it’s obligatory for every Muslim to fast, if he’s not sick or travelling. How the hell can you leave fasting?” Haji sahib was angry.

“A couple of years ago, Haji sahib, during the protests against Danish cartoons I received some serious injuries. One of my arms got fractured and my jaws were also broken. That year I was not able fast and since then I haven’t been able to muster enough strength to resume fasting.”

“But this is no damn justification.”

“You are very right Haji sahib. Actually, I’ve tried a couple of times but wasn’t able to get through. During fasts I couldn’t concentrate on my lectures for which I get paid. Hunger kills my concentration.”

“You can teach and the students can study the whole year. One month would hardly make any difference. You ought to honor your religious obligations as well.”

“Haji sahib, I’m a humble mortal. Not that I don’t fear Allah. I really do. I try to justify my pay; I don’t lie, cheat, backbite, hoard, or bother anyone. I try to teach with utmost honesty and passion. I don’t submit to any kind of pressure to promote students. I’ve made my work my worship.”

“*La hola wala quwah*, Azad sahib you may do all the good deeds in the world but if you don’t pray and fast you are hell-bound.”

“I try my best to fulfill *Huqooq-ul-Ibad*. As far as *Huqooq-ullah* are concerned, I think it’s between Allah and the man. He may forgive, He may not,” Azad said coolly.

Haji sahib felt a little cornered and said, “Anyways *janab*, I had come to take you to *Zohr* prayers

but since you don't fast what's the use of offering *namaz*?"

Haji sahib turned to leave and Azad asked him, "Would you mind Haji sahib if I ask you a rather personal question?"

"No." said Haji sahib reluctantly.

"Haji sahib, you *mashallah* belong to a wealthy family, you have your own business, then why this petty government job?"

"You're damn right, Azad sahib. Because Allah has been very kind to me so I want to serve the nation. I've vast reserves of knowledge which I want to share with the youth and being in a government job becomes very handy if you are doing business."

After satisfying Azad's curiosity, Haji sahib left.

\* \* \* \*

After the Zohr prayer that day, Haji sahib went to his typical corner of the mosque. Shortly, his students joined him.

"*Bismillah wal hamdulliah...*" Haji sahib began his *dars*.

"Brothers, today I shall talk about the sanctity of Ramadan. You all are well aware of it but I want to draw your attention to the fact that many people around us are not fasting which is absolutely shameful and unacceptable. It's our duty to stop these un-Islamic actions. This is for the good of us all,"—Azad was surely on Haji sahib's mind—"and if it requires us being harsh, we shouldn't mind it." Haji sahib was emoting with a mixture of anger and religious pride.

The *dars* lasted for twenty minutes. Afterward, Haji sahib held back a few boys and started instructing them.

“Haji sahib, if you order we can beat the hell out of him right now,” said one of the boys who had earlier been in a fix over the exact number of Taraweeh. “Then instead of leaving fasts, he would preach to others to fast.”

“Keep your damn voice low, bugger,” Haji sahib scolded him. “Just be on the lookout. First try to convince him verbally; if he argues, give him two, three.” Haji sahib sounded like a military commander.

On his way out of the mosque Haji sahib was called by Ghani on his mobile phone. Since he was driving he put the phone on hands-free and placed it on the dashboard.

“Bahi jan, *besan*’s demand has increased and our stock is running out. Two more days only.” Ghani’s voice jumped out of the phone’s speaker.

“You go to the *godowns* in the village, get the *dals* from last year, grind them and add to the *besan*.” Haji sahib offered him the solution.

“But those are rotten probably.”

“That’s why I’m telling you to do this, you damn moron! Who is going to ask? People will eat *pakorras* and our *dals* of the last year would be utilized too.”

“Okay, Bhai jan,” came a humbled reply.

\* \* \* \*

In scorching heat, outside the Electronics Market, Azad was waiting with his repaired computer for a rickshaw. But there were no signs of one. After fifteen long

minutes, a three-wheeler appeared. The driver drew a heavy bargain but Azad agreed. The sun was angry.

The rickshaw dropped Azad at the main entrance of the university. Azad paid the driver and started thinking how to transport the various components of his computer when he spotted five bearded young boys dressed in *shalwar-kameez* and turbans approaching him. Before Azad had figured out why, they were onto him. Two of the boys pushed him flat on the ground. One then pinned him down while the rest showered him with kicks. Azad's frail body tried to withstand the attack on his chest and abdomen. But when two of the attackers started lashing his back with wire-locks, he couldn't help crying.

He was about to lose consciousness when the bearded mujahedin stopped the attack, remarking, "This is far less than what you'd get in the afterlife for not fasting. Better start fasting now."

Another said, "You might as well listen to us."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, the always-punctual Azad's absence was noticed. When the students of the English department learned that he had been hospitalized, they paid Azad a visit immediately.

When the students arrived, Azad was half-sitting half-lying on his bed, wrapped with a number of bandages. He struggled to sip soup from a bowl. Upon seeing Azad's helplessness, a girl stepped forward and helped him. When the students asked him as to what had gone wrong, he narrated his encounter with the bearded boys.

Upon hearing this one of his student's remarked, "So these are the puppies of Haji Sharif-ud-Din sahib."

"Don't accuse anyone without evidence." Azad said in a stern tone.

"Evidence! You want evidence sir; my younger brother is a member of Haji sahib's party. Some days back he told me they had thrashed a couple of teachers of philosophy as they don't fast. I reported this to my father who expelled him from the home."

"If you say, sir, we can level the scores on the field," another boy suggested.

"Don't even think of this," said Azad. "There must be some difference between them and you. I'll try to resolve the matter amicably by writing to the VC so that he may take the necessary legal action."

The next day Azad dictated one of his students an application regarding the incident and requested remedial action and compensation.

During his stay at the hospital, Azad was visited by various faculty members who paid him several visits. Most notable among the faculty was the vice chancellor who visited Azad twice and assured him that the culprits would be dealt with with an iron hand. For Azad and his students, it was a matter of great relief that the vice chancellor had guaranteed pursuing a case for expulsion of all those involved in this shameful act.

\* \* \* \*

The day after being discharged from the hospital, Azad was at the VC's office at 9. The VC, as usual, arrived late.

“Good that you visited. I was thinking of calling you,” the VC said while offering him a chair. “Actually, Mr. Azad, this is a complicated matter.”

“Sir, I’ve only come here to know about the actions you’ve taken against the culprits,” Azad said, wondering what was complicated.

“This is the very problem I wanted to discuss; it has become a kind of an imbroglio.”

“Sir, if you want I can give you some information about those boys.”

“Thank you very much Azad sahib, I’ve got the complete record of them.” The VC said, pointing towards a bundle of files on his table.

“So what is stopping you from taking the necessary action?”

“Now this is the actual problem. These boys, you know, are of Haji sahib’s party and he personally came to tell me not to take any action against them.”

“Sir, this is going to set a very bad precedent and then you are the vice chancellor. Please don’t tell me you’d be dictated by a lecturer and that too when you know he’s wrong.” Anger surged in Azad’s heart and he made no effort to conceal it.

“Dear Mr. Azad, Haji sahib is not an ordinary lecturer. Do you know our minister of education is his business partner and the present governor had been a close friend of his father’s?”

“So you want to say that you’ve been pressured by that hypocritical hoarder and that you’re going to succumb to it!” Azad was shouting now.

“Don’t be so emotional. Frankly telling you, Haji sahib is influential enough to get even me sacked.”

“But sir...” Azad tried to say something but was interrupted by the VC.

“Listen to me patiently, Azad. Let’s suppose I take action against them. Haji sahib would get me sacked to avenge it and the next VC would surely expel you and may even write about you being anti-religion in your expulsion order. This way we both lose.”

Azad had never felt so helpless his whole life.

“Haji sahib and his party ask for your expulsion which I know is absolutely wrong but tell me what should I do, I have a family.”

“Do whatever you feel like, sir,” said a defeated Azad.

“I suggest you resign.” The VC gave him a sheet of paper and a pen.

Azad kept quiet.

“Or should I get your resignation typed?” The VC offered.

Azad remained quiet for what seemed to be an eternity. Ten minutes later the assistant brought in a typed paper. It was written that the undersigned was not able to concentrate on the sacred job of teaching because of familial commitments and therefore wanted to resign. Azad took a long look at the paper and finally signed it.

Azad left the VC’s office with heavy steps, went straight to his room and started packing his bags. He had no idea where he would go. All he wanted was to get out of the university as soon as possible.

On his way to the main gate of the university, Azad had to stop for a couple of times as his broken body was not able to carry the heavy luggage. When he reached the main gate, he felt thirsty and went to the



nearby hut of the watchman to have a glass of water. After drinking, he came out only to find the three bearded youths standing outside to welcome him.

This time the mujahedin were economical with their efforts. A couple of punches, some kicks, and then they dragged him by his hair and threw him out of the main gate of the university. Azad cried with pain. They raised the slogan of Allah-u-Akbar with pride. After the Zohr prayers that day, the mujahedin reported to Haji sahib that the university had been cleansed of the existence of a non-praying, non-fasting *kafir*. Thus, the *jihad* of Haji Sharif-ud-Din, which had started on the 1st of Ramadan, ended successfully on the 27th.

# Heat

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by Michael Henson

1.

Heavy snow covered the fields and made the back roads nigh impassible. The main roads and highways were clear, but Russel Road, because there was nothing on it but a string of isolated farms and a junkyard, had not been even nicked by a plow.

JD could feel his tires spinning over the ruts. But he felt no fear of slipping into the ditches. He had driven such roads before. He could handle this. His feet were chilled from the drafts in the floorboards, and every few minutes he had to brush the fog from the windshield with his glove. Under the dash, the guts of his heater were exposed so that other drafts spun around his kneecaps. His legs felt like cold glass.

But he had been through worse. He could handle this.

Black stands of trees stood in the distance. Blacker stands bent closer to the road. Stubble broke out of the snow-covered furrows like notes on a page of music.

He saw the thick band of black trees that lined the creek bank and he readied himself. He knew what was coming: the sudden dip of the road toward the bridge and the space before the bridge where the shoulders of the road, guarded by flimsy, gray, wooden guardrails,

fell away on each side just before the abutment. To make it, and to stay clear of the falling shoulders, he gunned his motor, steered hard to the left as he felt the rear end shift that direction, then gunned the motor again as the car righted itself and took the bridge. "Come on, you bitch," he whispered. He held the pedal right to the carpet as he fishtailed over the floor of the bridge and started up the opposite bank. He prayed no one was coming the other way.

No one was. He crested the hill with his pistons crackling and the windshield full of sky. The rush of making it warmed him so that he forgot the brittle cold in his feet and legs.

Flanagan's was just ahead. The gray, fallen-in fences of the yard rose up out of the snow like wounded men on a battlefield. Beyond the fences, rows of junkers fanned out into the field, dark bodies against the white. Unlike other junkers, Flanagan kept his cars in neat, semi-circular rows, like cars at a drive-in movie.

The junkyard had once been a farm. The barn, buckled under from rot, leaned to the rear. The old farmhouse was boarded up. Flanagan used it now to store parts. The office was a low cinder-block box with a tar paper roof.

Woodsmoke poured from the chimney; he knew Flanagan was there. JD was glad of it; he could not afford to make this trip for nothing. He began to slow for the turn, for the space between the fences.

The snow in the yard had been tracked and pressed down and shoved into heaps by other customers. A pickup truck was parked by the door. A motor, half-covered by a tarp, lay in the bed of the

truck. JD pulled up beside the truck and snapped off his ignition. The pistons rattled and settled.

He grabbed the heating core he wanted to replace and got out of the car. A crow called through the empty air from its perch beyond the fences, in one of the black trees.

2.

Light from the yard swept into the office when he opened the door. Flanagan, in coveralls and a ball cap, stood at the counter. With him was another man, the driver of the pickup truck, JD guessed. Together, they were studying a dismantled carburetor.

A wood stove crackled in the middle of the floor. A kettle for coffee water steamed on top of it. Behind the counter, and on all the walls, shelves were packed with parts that had been mined out of the wrecks out back. Sections of the floor were given over to a pile of bell housings, a pyramid of generators, radiators stacked like waffles, a pride of motors ranked like stuffed lions. A pool of melted slush lay near the door. The place smelled of used oil and wood smoke.

Flanagan raised an eye from the carburetor and looked from JD to the door then back to JD. He kicked the door shut and stepped to the counter.

“What can I do you for?” said Flanagan, his screwdriver still probing the inside of the carburetor.

JD laid the core on the counter.

“Heater core,” said Flanagan. “Chevy II.”

JD nodded. “You got it,” he said. Flanagan could tell nearly any part by sight and could tell you intimate

histories of most of the parts on his shelves or in the heaps on his floor.

“You picked the right season for it.” Flanagan had only briefly turned his eye from his work. The man at the counter grinned. JD did not. He was in no mood.

“I reckon,” JD said.

Flanagan nodded toward a cotter pin that lay among the parts on the counter. The other man picked it up, handed it to him, and watched as Flanagan inserted the pin and splayed its points.

“You think we got it now?” Flanagan asked the man.

“Aint but one way to find out.”

Flanagan turned to JD. “So I reckon you want to get you a heater core.”

JD nodded, thinking, *No, I just drove out here in this snow for the pleasure of it.*

“How’s the kids?”

“They’re just fine.”

“I reckon Michelle’s none too happy about ridin around with no heat.”

JD hesitated. Just for a moment. “No she sure aint,” he said.

“Not with the kids anyway.”

JD said nothing to this, so Flanagan picked up the heater core, a radiator the size of a textbook or a family Bible. “It sure enough looks shot,” he said, fingering the green salts that had formed on the copper honeycomb. He pointed to the center of the salts. “Looks like your leak’s right there.”

“So you got another one to match?”

Flanagan drummed the counter with the tips of

his fingers. "Not in here," he said. He nodded in the direction of the field. "I aint got time to pull you one right now. There's about fifteen little little screws holds that in place, aint they?"

JD nodded. "Plus that many more just to get the cover off."

"They're a real pain in the ass to get out or to put in either one. Awkward to get at." Flanagan placed his hands wide on the counter. He looked from one man to the other. "You got to bend yourself into all kinds of shapes to get in there." He looked for confirmation to the man with the pickup. The man nodded. "But it's all in how bad you want the heat."

Flanagan looked to JD. "You got any tools with you?"

JD nodded again. He had figured this would happen.

"You want to pull it yourself, I'll sell it to you couple dollars off."

"I reckon I aint got much choice."

"Well you do if you want to pull you up a chair and set there and wait. Got plenty of wood. You won't freeze."

JD felt a sting in the words. He could not quite read Flanagan, whether he was mocking him or making a genuine offer. Anyway, he had no time. "Naw," he said. "Where's it at?"

"Wait a little bit. Get yourself warmed up fore you go out there into that snow. I don't reckon you got a lot of heat on the way out here."

"Naw, it's all right."

"That wind cuts right through these wrecks like a knife."

JD paused, just for a moment. The heat of the wood stove had just begun to affect him. He could

just feel his muscles warming. For just a moment, a blink, he leaned toward the stove. Just long enough for a bead of resin to pop in the fire. But he caught himself short. He said, "Where'd you say it was at?"

"They're scattered all through here. Three or four. Maybe half a dozen."

"I'll find em."

"Make sure you get a good core. None of that corrosion on it."

JD headed for the door to get his tools.

"You get cold," Flanagan said, "Come on back in and warm up. Get a cup of coffee."

JD nodded. He was not worried. He had been through worse. He could handle this.

### 3.

Flanagan opened the door of the stove, broke up the embers with the tie-rod he used for a poker, shook the cinders through the grate, and placed another chunk of maple on the fire. He heard the pickup grumble out of the lot, and limped back to the counter where his tools still lay spread out. He began to place them in their drawers. He was hoping no one else would be in and he could close up early. He had an engine that needed rebuilding. But it could wait. He was in no hurry.

The wind swept against the building, and though the cinderblocks were solid, he could sense the lean it put to the trees, the woodframe buildings, and the fences. In this part of Ohio, where the land was mostly flat and unbroken, the wind had only the

scattered woodlots, farmhouses, and barns to slow it, only barbwire fences and the branches of trees to string it back. He thought about JD out on the lot in that wind. It had been half an hour at least. He looked out through the small block windows and, though his eyes were not so clear any more for that distance, he thought he could see JD in his blue jacket and bandy-legged swagger stalking among the wrecks.

“That boy’s got a lot on his mind,” Pollard the man with the carburetor had said. And he was right. Flanagan, not one to talk about someone else’s business, merely nodded, and neither said another word about it.

Now, watching JD’s blue coat weave in and out among the neat rows of wrecked automobiles, he thought again. JD’s movements were jerky, abrupt, almost as if someone had wound him up and sent him spinning.

At first, his impulse was to throw on his coat, now that his business with Pollard was finished, and go out and help him. But he decided there was not that much he could do for JD that JD could not do for himself. *If he don’t freeze*, he thought.

He threw the last of his tools into its bin and he listened as the wind swept again, carrying with it a sound of crows and of shifting snow.

4.

JD threw open the door of the car, ran out into a clear space, swung back his arm, and flung the heater core—the third he had pulled—with a motion so full of force that he was nearly pulled over face first into



the snow. He staggered forward to keep from falling, then caught himself on the severed body of a pickup truck. He heard the core clatter and smash against one of the wrecks a few rows down. The wind spat snow in his eyes.

5.

The first core he had pulled had been a match for his own, crusted in the same spots and same colors. To pull it, he had to lay across the front seat with his head suspended, looking up into the underdash case and frame that held the core in place. He bloodied his cold knuckles trying to ratchet out the small screws. Eventually, he had to shift and slide downward so that his head and shoulders rested against the floorboards. It was a cramped, suffocating position. But he knew what he was doing. He could handle it.

He had to pull the core all the way out, free of the brackets and hoses, all the way into his lap before he could tell it was corroded. He dropped that one behind him and looked for the next one. Later, he thought he should have saved it for the copper, but now it was lost in the snow.

The second heater case was an empty shell. The core was gone. *Somebody got to it before me*, he thought, *so why in hell did they go to all the trouble of puttin all them screws back in?* He figured Flanagan would have a history on it, if he wanted to ask.

6.

What a heater core does:

A second, smaller radiator. It waits, encased under the dashboard of your car. Water from the engine system, warmed from the fires in the pistons, is pumped along a hose, across the fire wall, and through the core, then back along another hose. A fan blows air across the heated core. The heated air warms you.

7.

Having flung that third, corroded core, JD stood fixed in his spot in the snow. He wiped the snow out of his eyes with his cold, stiff hand. A nagging crow called over and over from somewhere near the edge of the yard. A feeling, useless and heavy as a blown motor, rose up in his belly.

8.

All through the pulling of this third core, he had heard nothing but her voice. Through the loosening of thirty small screws and the unfastening of two hose clamps and the slitting and the peeling back of the two heater hoses, he heard her, bitching and bitching, endlessly bitching about the lack of heat.

"I've had it," she had said.

*I've had it*, he mocked her as he lay on his back with his head on the floor reaching up into the underparts

of the dashboard for the hex-headed screws that held the case. The cold had settled in him, bone by bone. He noticed that, more and more often, his ratchet slipped, and he cursed the tool, the tiny heads of the screws, his scuffed knuckles, and the woman. *She aint the only one who's had it*, he thought.

"I've had it with you and your damn cars," she had said. "You've got six of em out there and aint but one runnin and you've known since July it didn't have no heater in it.

"Just as long as you get to play with your toys, it don't matter to you if the kids turn blue from the cold."

That was when he raised his hand to hit her. She never knew it; she was turned toward the sink and he was behind her with his fist balled up and raised back like an axe. He checked himself; he held back without swinging. But it was hard. He wanted to beat her down. He wanted to silence her.

He had never yet hit her. He hoped he never would.

Instead, he doubled his fists together and ground them one against the other. When she started up again, he did not intend to hear any more. "Okay, goddammit," he shouted to keep from knowing what else she would pile on his head. He jerked up his tool box and pulled open the door. Amy, the oldest, stood watching him and chewing on the fingers of a doll. He stopped for a moment, struck by something merciful and fearful in the child's crow-black eyes.

"And you don't need to stand there givin away what little bit of heat we've got in the house," Michelle had shouted from the sink.

“All right! All right!” He slammed the door shut and stamped through the snow to the car. He threw his tools into the seat, started up the engine with a roar, and slithered down the street toward the edge of town where Russel Road led out to Flanagan’s and the farm country.

It took a mile of slickness and risk before his rage settled enough that he could concentrate on snow driving. By that time he was out on Russel Road with its dips and contortions.

He figured: he had six dollars left until he got paid for the overhaul job he had done last week. There was no way he could pay for a new core, even if he could find one in a parts store, even if they had one in stock. Five or six dollars is what a junker would charge.

If he used the whole six dollars to pay for a core, he would have no cigarette money for a good three days. Something in the notion satisfied him, as if he had just proved a point to her.

9.

The heater case came free and fell against his face. He jerked it away and threw it over the seats. He attacked the frame screws, conscious only of his driven muscles. Each screw started with a sharp noise like a bite.

*She could sit there and complain when I been workin my ass off just to keep the rent paid and food in the house, he thought. I could be layin up drunk of a night and day like her ex-old-man. She don’t think of that.*

The screws dropped, one by one, onto the floor.

*She aint got enough to complain about, that's what it is.*

Two more screws. The head of the first refused to break loose. He pulled back his ratchet and looked. Rust, like a collar of lace, lay around the head of the screw. He put the ratchet back to it and tried the turn. He felt it give and realized, too late, that he was rounding the head of the screw. He knew if he rounded it anymore, he would face drilling or hammering to get it out: more time hanging suspended in the cold. But he did not allow the fear to come up in him. He placed the socket back on the screw, tapped once on the back of the ratchet to make a snug fit, then turned. It snapped and loosened. He ratcheted it the rest of the way out, then drew the last screw. The frame fell loose. He tossed it too into the back seat, turned the clamps loose with a screwdriver, and went to work on the hoses with his pocketknife.

He was confident from the way his luck had gone with the rounded head. He worked the hoses loose and angled the heater core out of the box. He hesitated, just for a moment, before he turned it over. He wanted to savor the moment.

He turned it over as if he were turning a page.

The core was covered with grey-green salts.

10.

Having flung the corroded core as far as he could, and having cursed and fumed until he was breathless,

he stood in the clear space long enough, finally, to have argued it out with her in his head. He had not a shred of righteousness left. He was beaten. He had known even before he left the house that he was beaten.

The rage poured out of him like water. He felt riddled with defeat, with shame.

He heard the wind pick up again and felt it shift against him. Beyond the field of wrecks, he heard a flock of crows; he saw them gather along the fence-line and in the shattered corn.

# Waiting for Home

by Ron Koppelberger

It was an expedition into Baku's reckless incense and vigor, an uncultivated scramble of liberty; he handled the TV dinner tray as he dropped it to the floor, he scooped up the last bit of meatloaf from his gray socks, he liked the way the juice squished between his toes. Spatters of gravy had sprayed across the floor in a fan pattern of sauce.

Baku Upsilon: Baku from his native tribal designation and Upsilon because he had been the twentieth warrior in the tribal hierarchy. Potato chip bags and other trash padded the mosaic tiles of the tenth story high-rise. Baku considered the view from the penthouse window, a profusion of uproarious wanting, of dashing squirming squabble on the streets below. They move in circles, he thought, from one corner to the next. Baku touched the window, dragging his gravy coated fingers across the glass.

For a moment he considered the man who had brought him to the stone jungle. He was pale and blonde, dressed in soft tethers of prepared cotton cloth. A deceptive enticement to the means of outsiders.

Baku paced back and forth across layers of spilled food and empty wrappers. He wore nothing except for a white pair of Fruit of the Looms and a pair of

gray socks. He knew they would come to the apartment later in the morning. A woman would clean the floor and a man dressed in what he referred to as a “suit” would dress him like the others. Baku remembered the woman from the previous day. She had worn a lacy dress and a silk scarf on her hair. She was well fed he remembered thinking that she might eat some of his food. She had spoken few words except to comment on his uncleanness.

Baku hefted the ceramic ashtray in his right hand, he took a long breath and exhaled with a grunt. The endless sea of glass and stone was too much for him. Declaring his intent he invoked a benediction in his native tongue and waited, waited for the man to return, waited for the warm winds of home.



# After Reaching the Home of Juan Pablo Lorenz

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by Marc Levy

In 1992 I bought a one way ticket to Guatemala. The goal: to learn Spanish, then return to New York to work with immigrants affected by brutal civil war and its aftermath. I spent my first month in the sleepy highland village of Todos Santos, and then I made a series of treks through Central America over the next eight months. Yet after each journey—El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico—I came back to dirt-poor, stunningly beautiful, unspoiled Todos Santos.

Saddled between the tall peaks of the Cuchumatanes, the town had two paved roads and three cars; flea-bitten dogs sunned themselves on the cobblestone streets. There were no phones, no banks, no televisions. Indoor plumbing was scarce. Hole in the wall *tiendas*—store fronts made artful by sun and rain—sold snacks, bread, soda, candles, and purified water in clear plastic bags. Quetzelteca, said to keep the indigenous drunk and thereby quiet, cost twenty cents per pint.

In Todos Santos, the proud indigenous men wear straw hats, hand-loomed red and white striped trousers and white shirts with large embroidered collars. The strong but obedient women wear the customary ankle-length dark skirt and colorful hand-woven vests. At the time, most lived in dirt-

floored, sparsely furnished adobe huts heated by wood burning stoves.

In the '80s, during Guatemala's Civil War, the village was massacred twice. The Army used the church as a prison, cut off peasants' ears, set fire to feet, slaughtered mules, burnt crops, smashed tools, raped women. Such things occurred throughout Guatemala for quite some time.

"*Vida es triste*," say the peasants of Todos Santos. Life is sad. Most gringos haven't a clue about the arduous farm work, the cold nights, the search for wood to light the stoves, the sun-beaten crosses in the quiet green field two hundred meters past the town market, a monument to the town's tormented dead.

I lived two trails above town in a half-constructed cement house being built by thin, industrious Desidero and his plump wife Clementina. On the first floor was a dusty jumble of tools, electrical wires, and broken concrete blocks, but the cast cement stairwell led to my perfectly square room with a box spring bed and a naked light bulb that hung precariously from the ceiling by exposed red wires. On the south wall, an arched window overlooked a valley of emerald cornfields and steep mountains dotted with scrub and pine. At dawn, as excited roosters crowed, as waking women re-lit ashen fires, a wispy white fog descended from the mountains into the valley. My rent was ten dollars a month.

James, another gringo who occupied the room next door, slept in a Mexican hammock. Muscular and friendly, a frequent visitor who spoke impeccable Spanish, James earned the townspeople's trust.

Each morning, after a cold shower, after washing our clothes in the chipped cement sink by the chicken coop, after ringing out the wet cloth the Maya way, firmly twisting the water out inch by inch, hanging the laundry on a line atop the windswept roof, we walked the trail to Tres Olgitas, a dollar-a-night fire-trap of unheated rooms; the exquisite meals cooked by three young women always cheap and delicious.

Sometimes without James, I hiked the long steep mountain paths. Trekged them for hours. What compelled these wanderings I did not know.

“Where are you going?” asked the wheat-skinned villagers in their slow melodic Spanish. Their first language, M’am, so sharp and different with its frequent glottal stops.

“For a walk,” I answered, beginning the long ascent.

Each day they ask, “Why, mister? Why do you walk?”

“For the exercise,” I say.

Dumbfounded, they smile. Only fools work without compelling reason.

Another war—one with a prickly tangle of jungle and vines, its stifling green curtain of infinite heat, a war in Asia where sudden shots made dry red dirt more crimson than war, with its walking dead and ancestral spirits—dogged my every step. I did not know it.

Once, when trucks from far-off cities and towns arrived with bales of used clothing, when distant villagers came to sell house wares, farms tools, meat from hanging carcasses, aromatic spices in wicker baskets or burlap sacks, an array of fresh vegetables, I wept before walking.

It happened like this: Tugging on my jeans, buttoning my red cotton shirt, lacing up my leather

boots; somewhere in town a man or boy struck a match to a string of firecrackers which announced Market Day. But this time I heard the crackle of AK-47s and M-16s, felt the heated downdraft from chopper blades, shook and sobbed until the flashback in a town twice massacred, in a country that had seen decades of devils, vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Like a good lieutenant, James does not get lost. When the sun fails to burn away the mists of impenetrable white, he marches forward, deftly twirling a hand-carved Kendo stick, as if chopping the clouds in half.

Past the easy main trail, past the ladder-like gauntlet of switchbacks that force us to crawl or constrict or stretch our bodies, we climb to eleven thousand feet. On a grassy spot we slip off our packs, sit and gulp purified water. After a time, two peasant boys dressed in colorful rags drew near like jackals. I reach into my shirt pocket.

“Here, I give this to you,” I say, in Spanish.

A few cigar puffs later the boys cough and giggle and set the grass on fire. We help them extinguish the blaze, say to them “*Adios*,” then trek the last thousand meters to the home of Juan Pablo Lorenz.

We’ve never asked Juan Pablo why he lives at the mountaintop. Why he has chosen this lonely life. The Altiplano, unlike the fertile valley, is a landscape of desolate but spectacular outcroppings and skeletal trees, which stand out against the clear sky, the receding ranks of the pastel Cuchumatanes. Here, at

twelve thousand feet, the thin air imparts a supernatural feel to all sight and sound. A crow's wings claps like thunder. The bark of a dog is a frightful event.

"*Bienvenidos*," says Juan Pablo, shooing away the excited pet. "*Pasen adelante... pasen...*"

Few people visit here, but nearly all villagers have dogs to warn of thieves. Stepping forward, we crouch to enter the low doorway of the large hut built from timber planks stood on end. Juan Pablo, perhaps in his twenties, is a thin, happy man with a broad handsome face; a half moon smile reveals his large white teeth; his thick black hair pokes out from a traditional straw woven hat. His pretty young wife, Elizabeta, carries their frightened infant daughter on her back in vibrant cloth stitched with ancient Maya patterns. "Mmm... mmm..." she hums to her child. But still it whimpers.

In the center of the dirt floor, James, Juan Pablo and I sit around a three stone fire place. Behind us, in the dim light that peeks through the cracks between the upright boards, a kitten prowls through shards of broken pottery, dried chicken bones, wood shavings, newspapers, cardboard boxes. Here, an hour's walk from town, nothing is thrown out. Juan Pablo leans forward, turns his head sideways, and gently blows on the embers until the wood crackles and bursts into flame. The wood planks reflect our shivering shadows.

The rising smoke exits through a small blackened hole in the roof. The fire slowly draws the chill from us. I offer gifts: bread, hard-baked cooking chocolate purchased in Antigua, a pound of unshelled peanuts, four tins of milk, a large felt blanket.

“*Gracias.*” says Juan Pablo, but then asks, “*Por qué?*”

I don’t know why I climb so hard each day or if I need to help this man survive.

Elizabeta begins the ritual of making tortillas. She has already ground the corn in the traditional manner, whetted it into a thick white paste. In the warm hut, as her body shifts to the patter of her moistened palms, which quietly slap and press the dough into patties, the anxious child is lulled to sleep. One by one Elizabeta sets the bread disks onto a circular pan she has placed over the fire. One by one she turns the tortillas over with her finger tips. In these moments of tapping palms, the padded step of the playful cat, the burning wood sliding into itself, in this land of Maya dressed in brilliant patterns, of clandestine graves and unbridled beauty, James is puzzled by my tears but does not ask why I cry. And if he did I would not be able to tell him.

We say “*Adios*” to Juan Pablo. Goodbye to his wife, to the sleeping child, the slumbering kitten, the vigilant dog.

The return trek goes well. Like the Maya on steep trails, we tilt our bodies back, taking short hurried steps as we trot downhill. On the main wide trail, we run in curves which absorb our momentum so we do not to trip or fall or tumble over the mountain. We arrive at the village in half the time it took to reach the home of Juan Pablo Lorenz.

I say goodbye to James. “See you tomorrow,” he says. Then he is off for a communal meal at Tres Olgitas.

There are no customers yet at Comedor Katy’s, a restaurant of two cement rooms furnished with

simple pine tables and chairs; there are no menus, there is no music. An indigenous girl takes my order. It is always the same: a large bowl of vegetable soup, a plate of rice and chicken.

“*Sopa de verduras*,” she always asks. “*Y pollo?*”

“*Si*,” I say. “*Y pollo.*”

The girl leaves. In the dirt yard out back there is the sound of flapping wings, scampering feet, desperate squawks and final cackles. A cut to the neck and the bird is dead.

Waiting for the meal to cook, I see a small boy peering through the half open door; I wave to him. Barefoot, he wears torn dirty clothes, a hat with a hole in it, his face a mixture of hope and fear. He stares at me. I know this child; he has often approached then run away whenever I’ve climbed or descended the mountain alone. I make a welcoming gesture. The boy hesitates, then runs in and sits in the chair opposite me.

“What would you like?” I ask.

“*Naranja*,” he says, pointing to an empty bottle on a nearby table.

I call to a young woman in the kitchen lording over large kettles atop a wood burning stove. “*Señorita*,” I say.

She steps out from behind a curtain, her face and hands moist and pink.

“*Uno, por mi amigo*,” I say, pointing.

The girl nods; disappears, moment later sets a new bottle on the table. The boy, perhaps eight years old, cannot contain his excitement. I pry the metal cap off with the tip of a knife. He grasps the bottle with both hands, lifts it to his mouth, and guzzles the

thick orange drink. Nothing I can do will change his plight but for now he is happy.

Tacked to the far wall is a colorful poster of a gringo Jesus, his arms held wide open, palms turned upward, as if to embrace the world. His parted shirt reveals a split open chest; bolts of yellow light streak from his red sacred heart. As the boy drinks the sugar water, as King Jesus holds his sacred smile, as the soft clink of silverware is not the biting song of bullets, the girl sets the bowl of simmering vegetables, the plate of meat and rice, on the table. The aromatic steam fills the room. The boy stares at the feast but is silent. There is much hunger in proud Todos Santos.

*“Pollo, por mi amigo,”* I say to the girl.

Suddenly a middle-aged woman steps out from behind the curtain, with all her might hurls her sandal at a skeletal dog, drawn by the scent of food. She yells at the gaunt creature. A hundred glottal curses fill the air.

My legs and body tremble. The boy looks at me strange.

*“Que pasa, señor?”* he asks. *“Tiene fria? Por qué se agita? Por qué?”*

What’s happening, little friend? No, it’s not the cold mountain air or shivery chills but the sight of the thrown sandal and the sound of your last words that whisk me back in time.

Enemy grenades, primitive but effective, more often maimed Americans than killed them. During the ambush, after the snap of the chemical fuse, caused by pulling a bit of string, the invisible enemy hurled the wood handled grenade at us. It fell short but the blast twisted the machine gun’s barrel as if it



were clay. Someone threw one of ours, a smooth nasty little bomb with a killing range of five meters. After the fiery blast a sergeant thought we'd killed them all. But then a second snap, and this time the grenade landed between us and we five soldiers scampered away but not soon enough. *BOOM!* And we lay screaming.

But what can I say to you, my friend, that your family or neighbors do not know? What could I say, and how could I say it and what difference would it make in your world?

The dog yelps and scampers away. The angry woman picks up her shoe. The boy upends the bottle and drains it dry.

"*Gracias, amigo,*" he says, smacking his orange stained lips. "*Gracias.*" Then he is gone.

That night—after walking the small trails to Desidero's house, trudging up the cement stair case, after turning off the naked light bulb and laying down in my box spring bed in my square room overlooking the fertile valley, cloaked by darkness, sheltered beneath a felt blanket, before sleep overtook me—my tears fell like rain.

# Water Song

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by Terra Brigando

When I was a child, I found a dead bird in my plastic red wheelbarrow after the night of a rain-storm. I remember reaching my hands into the cold rainwater and pulling the bird out by the tip of its wing. I saw the gleaming feathers separate and the bones fan before I tucked the wing back in on the side of its body. Bird wings are not made for swimming. Feathers look solid, but the spine down the middle of them is hollow. A feather has as much air as matter. I held it in my palm for a moment, feeling the way its small body was completely soaked through, heavy and waterlogged. I buried it in my mother's garden that afternoon, using a stick for its headstone.

I have always heard that drowning is a peaceful way to die, fast and silent. People who have nearly drowned and regained consciousness describe the sensation before passing out as almost pleasant, as though they were in a dream, which seems odd to me, as drowning victims are being choked to death by the water around them. Instead of breathing in air, you begin to take in huge gasps of water that first enter your stomach and then later, begin to infiltrate your lungs. This can lead to cardiac arrest as your heart rate slows and the blood in your body begins to stop

flowing to your extremities in order to save enough energy for your vital organs,.

44% of drowning victims die when they are swimming.

\* \* \* \*

When I got a little older, I took swimming lessons at the local pool. One particular day, I was asked to jump off the high dive. At first I refused; it was too high. But I climbed the metal ladder anyway, my hands gripping it roughly, as though my life depended on those small silver bars. At the top, I crept to the edge of the cement diving board and looked down at the pool, a tiny shimmering square beneath me, dark and forbidding.

“No matter how deep you go in the water, you’ll pop back up again,” my teacher had told me, “The human body floats. All you have to do is just relax. Don’t panic. It’s when you panic that you get in trouble.”

I didn’t want to jump, I was sure I would die if I did. I told myself not to think. Mixing thinking and adrenaline gets you into trouble. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and stepped off the ledge all in one swift motion. I felt myself falling, the air tumbling around me, my throat dropping; or soaring maybe—like a bird, to my stomach. A wall of water hit me and I felt like I was being thrown through a thick sheet of glass. I looked up from underneath the water at the smooth ceiling of blue that covered me. I sucked in and water filled my stomach. But before I had time to panic, I felt my body rushing to the surface and then I hit the air. I took in a deep breath and let my lungs expand.

I swam back to the side of the pool, coughing. My teacher held out his hand to me. “Now that wasn’t so bad was it?” he said and I grinned.

“No,” I said, “Can I do it again?”

When I was a teenager, I became a lifeguard and swim instructor. Swimming is all just poetry really—smooth, long gliding strokes. Everything about swimming is symmetrical, first one arm and then the other, finger tips rising and falling evenly, backs arching up out of the water, slippery and glistening. And of course learning to swim can save a life, especially your own. Swimming is a craft, an ongoing line of movement. With the right rhythm, you can move with strokes and breaths as if you are able to breathe under water, the slow song of swimming.

Now, as a young adult, I refuse to go into the ocean. Swimming pools are fine, but not the sea. Swimming pools are chlorine green water that never moves, placid except for the opening and closing of itself as a body slips through. The ocean is a different story; a sinister mass of untrustworthy movements, saline waves that rise and fall without warning.

At eighteen years old, I was experienced with swimming pools of all sizes and kinds, but unfamiliar with the water of the ocean. I had been to the beach my entire life, but only to run around in the sand and watch the waves as they broke white against the shore. I had never attempted to swim in the ocean. I grew up in Northern California, where the beaches are cold and grey. Even in summer, the fog lies low against the shoreline and the unpopulated beaches are eerily silent except for the crashing of the waves against the sharp cliffs. People die along the Northern

California coast, and as a child, my mother, who was paranoid of sleeper waves, warned me to never turn my back on the ocean.

Naïve and enthralled with the sea, my friends and I packed up one Saturday afternoon and headed out through winding back roads to North Beach. We dressed in wetsuits because the water was frigid. Still, the water pierced through my heavy cladding and stung my skin. No one knew how to surf and so instead we decided to head out into the sea and body surf, letting the waves swell around us and carry us back to shore.

I was good at it, crawling my way across the waves and riding them until they tapered out into sea foam and washed me up on shore like the slippery pieces of seaweed that lay scattered across the sand in glittering heaps. The sky was a menacing accumulation of thunderclouds that day and the ocean began to brass over in a murky color. On the last trip out, I failed to catch the wave my friends caught back to the shore. I wasn't that worried. I could just catch the next one. I looked back over my shoulder to an oncoming wave, but instead of being able to position my body on top of it, I watched as the darkened water curled over on itself and came crashing down on my head. I plunged beneath the ocean and inhaled a deep breath of sour seawater.

I knew nothing about undertows, rip tides, currents, eddies, or the treacherous ways that waves can push you down under the water and hold you there. All I knew was that I had to get to the air. I frantically pulled myself to the surface. But just as my head lifted from the water, another wave came roaring down on

me and instead of breathing in air, I took in another mouthful of water and sea foam as I was thrown below the ocean for a second time.

When humans enter the water, they can automatically hold their breath longer than they can on land. Maybe it is because we know that on land, we always have air, but underneath the water, it's a matter of survival. The body goes into oxygen-saving mode. The heart rate and blood flow slows. People have survived over thirty minutes of submersion after their bodies have shut down without any physical or mental damage. But panicking humans cannot hold their breath; they intake whatever element surrounds them.

Beneath the water, I tried to stabilize my feet on the bottom of the sea, but as I stretched my toes to hit the sand, I felt nothing, just a vast expanse of more water. I began to panic. I remembered what it was like to swim, how you move your arms and legs in opposite and simultaneous motions all at once, pulling the water so that you commanded it instead of it commanding you. I had never felt helpless in the water before, had always been able to manipulate it, moving my body through it effortlessly; gracefully. Now I was being tossed and heaved. I had lost my instinct for swimming, for the underwater breathing I had so meticulously worked on since I was a child.

Suddenly, I remembered that you should swim diagonal to the shore if you were caught in a rip current, or rip tide, or were just drowning in the ocean in general. I began to wedge my body sideways and thrashed beneath the water, trying to gain a handle of my surroundings and to see if maybe I could begin

to transverse my way back to the shore. But just as I hit the surface again, another wave slapped me back under.

This happened for a long time and I spun around as if stuck in a washing machine. I became so weak that the thought of swimming my way back soon vanished. I didn't want to accept that this was the way that I was going to die. It was so ironic wasn't it? Swimming had been such a huge part of my life and in the end it would fail me. This is how people drown, I thought. It really wasn't peaceful at all, but terrifying and exhausting, to be restrained beneath the waves like a still-living butterfly pinned down in a glass display case. Finally, I was too fatigued to care. I closed my eyes.

I don't know if I passed out. I can't remember anything up until I was on a man's back and almost to shore. I looked up at the overcast sky and noticed a flock of sea gulls flying . I watched as they slid across the air lithely and with ease. Their wings stretched out before them, dark feathers at the tips spread wide like fingers. It was as though they were swimming through the air, pulling themselves along smoothly; elegantly. Birds are not made for the water, although they fly like they are.

I thought back to the small water-sodden bird I had found in my red wheelbarrow as a child and imagined the seagulls trying to fly beneath the sea, theirs wings struggling to rise under the water, feathered bodies failing to drive forward and eventually drowning. I realized how alike both water and air are, both fluid in their structures; easy to move through.

Once back on the beach, I still couldn't breathe. Air surrounded me but I was unable to take any of it in. It was a strange feeling, as though I was still trapped beneath the water. I didn't need CPR and my friends quickly took over as the man laid me on the sand. I don't know who he was or what he looked like, and when I was finally able to breathe again, he was gone.

As I sat up, saltwater surged out my nose and ears, stinging them and streaming down my face. I had taken in so much salt that my throat felt like it was on fire. I looked up again at the clouded sky as a few more seagulls flew by.

\* \* \* \*

Although I am no longer a lifeguard, I still enjoy swimming. A few times in the summer I'll slide into a placid chlorinated pool, lowering my body slowly until the tips of my toes reach the rough bottom. I still like to swim laps, body bending through air and water, goggles in place to see beneath the smooth surface, the beige walls and antiseptic tiles creating a kind of human aquarium, a whole sterile world of water. Gliding through, I can still feel the way my bones and skin ache for the water to be mine again, for me to be able to pull its strings like a puppet, the whole of it moving and warping around me. I can still command it, can still tumble through it effortlessly, but something is different now. The water no longer bows to me. Now water is no longer an art to me but has become mysterious and unknown. I have lost the poetry of movement, the slow melody of swimming. I have lost my water song.



# Shriveled

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by M.J. Fievre

Mother stood in front of the full-length mirror in the bathroom. She started taking off her blouse, then hesitated, scanning my reflection in the glass.

I nodded, insisting, "I want to see."

She looked at me pensively. "It's not pretty," she said.

"I still want to see."

She undid the hooks of her bra and showed me where Dr. Chandler had opened up both her breasts to get rid of the fibroids.

"My tits are all shriveled now," Mother said.

The operation had been carried out several weeks ago, but until that morning, when I was seventeen, I hadn't been able to muster the courage to look.

"I'm just glad you're okay," I said.

I felt the wave of emotions, the thumps inside my chest that betrayed them. I turned away, showing a sudden interest in Mother's zippered pouch on the dressing table. Inside a mirrored plastic compact, the once fluffy cotton pad was flat and frayed around the edges.

Mother put back her clothes and leaned against the mirror, facing me, squinting, as if evaluating an expensive purchase. "Are you okay?"

I wasn't.

When Mother had told me that it was going to be a "simple operation," I had not believed a single word.

After all, both my grandmothers have died of cancer. It runs in the family, as they say.

We have bad hormones.

Before they were diagnosed—separately, each when it was already too late—Grandma Simone and Grandma Clara were the very picture of blooming health: rosy cheeks, impervious to germs, hearty creatures.

I can still clearly see Grandma Clara lying on the hospital bed, fat pillows holding her head upright, and a pastel floral blanket pulled up to her chin. Her face had lost its fullness, and when I took her hand, it was cool, the pulse slow and unsteady under my fingers. A nurse strode into the room, eyes shuttered and noncommittal.

Ever since that day at the hospital, Death has not ceased breathing down my neck. I always believed that everyone—every single one of the people around me—thought about Death every day. Turns out that's not the case.

I've been obsessed by breasts since I was ten.

I was envious of Barbie's breasts—the upturned, pointed cones would never cause her any trouble. Barbie, stiffly beautiful and happy, would never share the curse of real womanhood.

At the market, I stared at the chests of the female vendors who kept their money in a folded wad in their dresses, against their breasts, so that it was soft and creased and warm when they lay it out on the car nose to count it. Did they worry about death by breasts?

When my older sisters and their friends talked, I made myself small and listened. They all remember me as a tenacious eavesdropper. What a wealth of in-

formation they must have provided about the changes in the female body. But somehow the few conversations I do manage to remember all involve tits.

As a pre-teen, too often I lifted my t-shirt and looked at my chest. I was horrified when my nipples started to get bigger and darker, and the puffiness turned into two small, but definite bumps. I didn't want a training bra, the wearing of which I feared would urge my chest to grow titties, but my friend Fanny told me, "If you don't wear a bra, your breasts will grow forever." She threw back her head, laughing.

My father brought me my first real bra, helping me to put my arms through the straps as he tried to find out how to fasten the back, how to snag up the shoulder straps. The elastic cups pulled against my chest, my bumps looking a little higher and bigger. I stood in front of the mirror, staring, twisting and turning in shock and awe.

My obsession intensified, my hands moving over my chest more often than ever before, probing, inquisitive. Is that a lump? My forehead creased, my upper teeth scraped my lower lip as I tried to locate a cyst, a fibroid, some kind of tenderness.

One day, I felt a sharp cramp. My jaw unhinged. I was in so much pain I thought I was going to die.

"Where is the pain?" Mother asked with furrowed concern, swatting a mosquito on her calf.

I shifted from foot to foot. "Right there," I said, pressing one hand under my belly. "And my breasts—they're about to explode."

I mocked my own anxiety, but while both of us sat by the phone waiting for the doctor to return our call,

cross-legged and reading, I chewed my already gnawed-at cuticles down to the bloody quick.

At the gynecologist's office the next day, I lay back on the paper scroll on a table, the cold rod of each metal stirrup pressed into each foot arch. I felt bare inside the paper gown. It wasn't the office of the sweet, sensitive Dr. Chandler, who was out of town, but that of some other doctor one of my aunts had recommended.

The doctor examined my breasts first.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked disapprovingly.

"No."

He looked at me doubtfully, his teeth very straight and white, although one of the front ones had what looked to be a hairline crack in it. Apparently, I didn't have a virgin's breasts.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, still probing my tits. His top lip had a natural outward curl that kept his face in perpetual sneer.

"Yes, I am sure. I am not sexually active." My tone was harsher than I intended it to be. "I'm only fifteen," I added, as if it really meant anything. And, "Are my breasts going to be okay?"

"You'll be fine," he said days later, when some lab results came back. "Your hormones are...wild! That explains your acne and your very thick hair... We found some micro-cysts. Don't worry. You're not going to die or anything."

He put me on the pill, and the manufactured hormones did seem to work some magic. No more pain. No more swollen breasts.

I was no less obsessed.

I startled when my first love traced his fingers

over the swells of my breasts. I felt butterflies flutter and float under my bellybutton.

“You have the most amazing tits,” he said.

“Will you love me when I don’t have them anymore?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know—if they have to cut them off.”

“And why would they have to do that?”

“Never mind.”

Fifteen years later, I am still obsessing over my breasts. My mother is visiting this week and she’s standing in front of the mirror in my bedroom, examining her breasts. This makes me uncomfortable.

“I don’t do this anymore,” I say. “I used to find lumps every single time. They were everywhere.”

I’m drinking a glass of milk with Milko in it—a crunchy, sweet, supposedly chocolate tasting-powder. I take a gulp, set down the glass on the night table and cross my arms over my chest. Breathe in. Breathe out.

“I’m afraid of breast cancer,” I say.

It’s the first time that I’ve really expressed my fear.

And somehow saying these words take the power away from them. I am overwhelmed with relief.

Mother walks toward the bed and sits next to me. Her face seems to be dissolving in sweat. It glows a shiny film. She curls her fingers into mine and I feel the heat of her palm. “Don’t worry,” Mother says. “I’ll show you how to self-exam properly.”

# the presence of others

by D.H. Sutherland

*"What I aim at in the Other is nothing more than what I find in myself."*

*- Jean-Paul Sartre*

...on streets and roads unseen  
the presence of others,  
a manifest presence  
of gestures, ticks, walks that unify  
the ground of their experience  
I hear them moving, listen to  
their stories, affairs and politics  
affirmation of a solitude  
an out-of-closet solipsism  
a growing on, outside of me  
in open mouthed recitations  
speaking on the streets  
the corners and avenues.  
Deny it if you can,  
conform, pretend, act  
as if you are not alone  
and the others will act as well,  
for what they are not, between us,  
I am not, but will practice.

# Grace

---

by Gale Acuff

When she crosses her legs, Miss Hooker, my  
Sunday School teacher, I lose my mind but  
I'm only 10 to her 30 or so  
and don't know why I feel the way I do  
but I'm willing to learn. I even come  
to church early just to get a good seat  
smack in front in our class semi-circle.  
I'm pretty sure that I'm in love. At night

I hold my pillow close because my dog  
can't sleep in the house and whisper to it  
*Good night, Darling*, but it never replies  
because she's fallen asleep.  
Last night I dreamt we ate out  
at the Dairy King, then went to the show  
—monsters chasing teenagers—and she clung  
to me even through the closing credits

—and then to the duck pond in the moonlight  
and then home in time to watch the late news.  
Miss Hooker fell asleep in my arms so  
I carried her to bed and then lay down  
beside her and when I woke,  
she was bringing me my breakfast,  
bacon and eggs and toast and Tang and more

bacon. Nothing's too good for my darling,  
she said. *Thanks*, I said. Then she said, *Let's have*

*a baby*. I swallowed my eggs and said,  
*Okay. How?* And then I woke, I mean for  
real, and dressed and ate (I wasn't hungry,  
though), and was first in class in Sunday School  
and sat in front of her and stared and stared  
all through David and Bathsheba, which was  
over my head anyway. After class  
I stayed to clap erasers and she asked  
me if I felt alright. *I feel alright*,  
I confessed—*I dreamt about you last night*.  
Oh, Miss Hooker breathed. That's funny, because  
I dreamt about you, too—you were my son.

*Oh*, I said. *Well, in mine, you were my wife*.  
Gracious me, she said. *Yes*, I said. *Praise God*.



# To an Old Poet Dying Young

by William Doreski

*In memory of James Neylon*

In your L.L. Bean crewneck  
and fizzle of white hair and beard  
you look as two-dimensional

as the maps on which I trace  
your fractures and seams of travel.  
Paris, San Francisco, Crete,

Japan; and now upstairs  
overlooking Paradise Valley  
you run your fingers over the spines

of dusty books and profess  
your lack of profession at eighty,  
women your only profession,

if I must account for you. Thira,  
a sullen little volcano,  
blew apart thirty-five hundred

years ago, clearing a space  
where the suffering of flesh  
against stone became your subject,

where the Mediterranean changed  
blue to grey to amber. So what  
if you lied? We all lie. Now,

with death a sure bet, you linger  
over troubled sheets of paper  
and watch snow fuss at the window

and brew tea of perfect amber.  
I know you're thinking of burning  
your papers again. You're thinking

about repose, how restless  
your corpse will feel, how shivery  
in that fresh new sweater, how soon

your books will outlive you, how young  
Paris seemed in the Forties  
when your dying had hardly begun.

# A Sargent Portrait, Maybe

by William Doreski

As I climb the hills above Walpole,  
snowlight filling the valley,  
I think of you reading Tolstoy  
with one hand shading your face  
from the glare of the window. Maybe  
you live only in a painting,  
a Sargent portrait; maybe  
I've imagined your small-boned  
repose, your curved black lashes  
a serious punctuation,  
your expression fixed and seamless.

The hills look so graceful in snow  
it's easy to compare them  
to folds and naps of the flesh,  
easy to apply those contours  
to your infinite mental landscape  
as well as your slinky posture;  
but I can't use them to construe  
the figure of you I envision,  
a mathematical rather  
than emotional state of grace.

Maybe that portrait by Sargent  
contains in two dimensions  
everything I know about you  
except that right now you're sitting  
over War and Peace and almost  
aware of me being aware  
of you; and down the valley  
a freight train's hooting along like  
someone unzipping a zipper  
to reveal that other dimension  
in which I'm sure you exist.

# The Transamerica Pyramid

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by Yaul Perez-Stable Husni

The Transamerica Pyramid is an old Gypsy  
who reaches up to rob the sky of its planets.

The Transamerica Pyramid is an old Gypsy—  
I want to hear him sing  
the wandering tune  
of his footsteps.

I want to swim  
in his eyes of distilled sunflower.

The Transamerica Pyramid is an old Gypsy  
veiled in quartz.

I want to see his picture in the newspaper  
His big lips enter  
my blue consciousness.

I want to spear the old Gypsy through the liver  
with a wooden knife,  
watch him bleed,  
so that we know he is alive  
and a Gypsy woman birthed his great body.

# **How to See Yourself**

by Shannon C. Walsh

I.

At the full-length, suck in then push out your stomach. Gingerly stroke your lower belly as if to pet the fetus.

Imagine the phone call, “Honey, my mom was right, two people in love can make a baby—it's a miracle!” Tell her that it's only right to marry the mother of your impossible child. Jerk your abs to pretend the baby's kicking. Remember your pregnant friend's uterus climbing up to her sternum, her stretched skin, a figure moving beneath that taut sheath. You wanted to vomit, thought something would pop through her stomach—an alien. Then the screaming for food, a change, a toy, a nappy, bobby, passy, blankie, potty—years of sticky screeches. Decide you'd rather be single.

## II.

Study your lips, eyes, nose—nothing special.  
When you flutter your lashes you look  
epileptic. Your breasts list toward your hips  
and your thighs look like garbage bags  
of tapioca pudding. But your ass  
is thick and round like a Thanksgiving  
turkey. Shake it, side to side, slowly,  
like Jessica Rabbit. Pretend you're in  
a sparkling blue dress, tight in the right spots,  
atop a piano crooning *Fever*.  
She's in the front row, in a zoot suit.  
When you leave the stage to work the crowd, sing  
on her lap, bottom barely touching  
her knees. She wants you, but can't have you.  
At the end of the show, she'll buy you a scotch,  
rocks on the side. And you'll saunter over,  
sip the drink push it back to the barkeep,  
"Jimmy, make it a Manhattan." And you'll treat  
her so badly, she'll just want you more.

III.

Catch the reflection of the fat cat  
lying on your bed and think she too looks  
like oversized poultry, and she couldn't  
make her stay. Realize mirrors don't show truths.  
In a business suit, the mirror makes you  
a mogul. In an orange vest, a hunter.  
You've never held a gun, but the glass  
doesn't discern between shown and real.  
When in pants, it appears a tree branch  
never blazed a scar across your shin,  
but you can remember the whizzing pain  
of falling from your perch. Even naked,  
the mirror doesn't show the marks She left:  
useless, ugly, unworthy. You should  
shave your head and tattoo a trashcan across  
your skull so a glance shows what you really are.



# **Town and Country**

by Luca Penne

A famous Thanksgiving dinner at my stucco urban palace. The tables arrange themselves variously: two very long ones, four shorter ones, two middling short, one slightly long. I realize the scene is unreal, my guests imaginary, conjured largely from the dead. My father, my Uncle Aloysius, Jack Bate and Herman Melville, Lord Byron and Teddy Roosevelt, Aunt Esther and Henry Adams, Charlotte Bronte and One-Arm Connolly, who killed himself at forty. The rattle of glassware makes a ghastly but cheerful music.

Unable to correlate my guest list, I step outside the urban dream and enter the rural one. A huge maple has broken and half-fallen, angled over the eggshell of my country house. Let it topple and smash the antique slate roof if it wishes. Meanwhile on a nearby ridge of naked basalt a gaggle of teenagers silly with beer is climbing a sullen mossy cliff. I shout at them to halt and descend, but they ignore me. When one falls and breaks her bones with a snap audible for a mile I laugh the meanest laugh.

Nothing will induce me to return to the Thanksgiving dinner I dreamed in a sorry moment. My country house, a sprawl of twenty rooms, is also a ghost of the mind, but it doesn't repulse me the way the imaginary dead, eating real food in my townhouse, do. I

lack a motive for either dream; but watching the huge broken maple sway like the Sword I suppose revenge against myself will do—the brief November day going sulfur-yellow at sundown and the lawn torn by frost-heaves exposing the bedrock.

# **A Frog Pond**

by Luca Penne

Off Dusthouse Road a frog pond stews in mingled purples and browns. The jitter of crickets and keening of cicadas fill the gaps between senses, alerting me to the continued expansion of the universe, critiquing various dimensions. The modest industrial buildings scattered along the edge of the woods—old brick, modern metal sheathing, fire-prone wood-frame—regard me without curiosity, though only the brick predates me, the rest erected in honor of the passing of my childhood. That is, the narrative includes both the raising of small buildings and the rearing of my person, parallel structures responding mainly in terms of strategy rather than mutual perception. The frog pond, however, remains murky, grape-fringed, difficult of access, private as the mind. The occasional croak of a frog expresses continuities I can't claim even with myself. To be a frog is to be all frogs, I guess. The industrial buildings don't even pretend to any permanence, and neither do I. Not that frogs don't suffer and die, but the pond, only twenty feet wide, resists the encroachment of worlds less complex and fully realized, and the fringe of grape and ivy upholsters this small fragility against clumsy people like me.

# **An Outdated Globe**

---

by Luca Penne

Russia remains the Soviet Union, Sri Lanka still Ceylon. Amusing myself with a razor knife, I cut out and peel away nations until the planet's piebald in my hands. Now in mockery of cosmology or divine rage, I drop the metal ball on the floor and stomp it flat. This feels good and I wish I could do it again, like any authentic creator disappointed by creation.

So much for a sublunary world susceptible to artificial frontiers, stamping of passports, military coups, and famines. So much for the United Nations and global capitalism. I pity those abstractions children study in grammar school, where no one learns grammar anymore.

Later, on the way to the landfill with a mess of trash including that crushed, humiliated globe, I wonder how many worlds lie beyond the measurable universe, whether the human ego counts as a world, whether the basic globe-shape adequately represents everything from atom through ego to macro-universe.

At the landfill the solid thump of trash bag tossed in the hopper satisfies so completely I wish I could discard my body that casually and violate the law of form and walk away into worlds unknowable as globes, atoms, egos. I stroke my razor knife and wish

I had the nerve to slice my arteries and learn if the blood flow is as cosmic as they say.

# **Dementia (I)**

by Julian Smith-Newman

At the appointed hour repetition  
Conducts us to the table once again,  
And we, abandoning what vague volition  
We retained, yield gratefully the reins.

A radiant evening, flaxen tablecloth  
As usual laid with china and oblique  
Streaks of the setting sun. I first, then both  
My father and my father's father seek

Our customary chairs and start to eat.  
The food is good; and the familiar scrape  
Of silverware on teeth, chewing of meat,  
Deliberate swallows, fills somewhat the deep

Inevitable silences: but for this  
We'd all go mad. As it is, we grow versed  
In ceding to a rhythmic peristalsis  
We invent, teaching ourselves the first

And only art dementia can perfect,  
This art of repetition. Evening sun  
Splinters across the dinner table, flecked  
With silver, glass. We eat until we're done.

# A state of mind, like most things—

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by Katelyn Kiley

i.

Yesterday, I climbed through  
a fresh snowfall, to your house  
where whiskey awaited me, and a fire  
that started and died within an hour.

The embers went cold and still  
we can't hold hands in front of anyone.  
If you try to hold a poem  
too tightly, it squeezes, suffocates  
and flattens out in front of you.  
It would be too heavy-handed to say  
*that is our relationship*, and yet—

Here I am, not saying that, but saying  
stop it with the goddamn video games already  
and, sadly, what I mean is  
aren't my hands more beautiful  
than anyone's? My words?

ii.

It's like trying to sew hair into scalp,  
the kind of connection only God  
can make, miraculous  
growth. What we need is  
some stem cells, to have a fair shot—  
a bit of my heart transplanted  
as a supplement to yours.

We are trying to fall because maybe  
we could save one another, then.

iii.

Lets move to a rainforest, live by  
only our wits, under tents permeated  
by heat and humidity, using our hands to make  
fire and dinner and everything—I'd smash  
this glass of wine and cross  
your forehead with what has spilled,  
lovebaptism by chardonnay—  
the whiskey was too much for me  
and it's not in a glass tumbler  
with three cubes of ice, instead,  
it's in a yellow mug, and you've used  
snow to make it a slushie, there is  
some black dot floating  
in the bottom but you drink  
anyway, I want to shake you.  
The cold is everywhere.



iv.

I find a half-eaten segment of  
clementine still stuck to its rind  
in the toe of my shoe the next morning.  
No one knows how it got there.

You walk me home through the snow and I make  
us breakfast. We are a week away from Valentine's  
Day.

I keep trying to pull myself out  
of my body. Ecstasy, it is called—not  
the same as love, or even  
sex. Sometimes eros is what we wish  
to escape from. You're wearing sunglasses,  
the day is white, this snow—light  
infinitely brighter, slushed out roads,  
inconsistent ground—slipping home.

# Falling Asleep in the Afternoon

---

by Daniel Lawless

Not navies harbor-bound in the veins  
Or the pen's gentle drift off the page  
But a thundering horde on the steppe  
And you little peasant all alone in a black field  
Outside your frozen village motionless mouth agape  
In wonder and gratitude at its huge approach  
That spells the end of everything

# Unknown Destination

---

by Daniel Lawless

Like one of the dead in Hans Memling's fifteenth  
century vision

Of the Last Judgment, stepping from their graves  
As if on risers onto a crowded stage,  
Trailing their winding sheets like matted boas—

So you came to me in memory

As I leaned against a pole at the Bruges station,  
Done in by the day's chilly museum crawl:

A farm boy Caesar out for a piss

At a long ago fraternity party,

Missing your step and tumbling into the pit

Your brothers had dug for the next day's pig roast,

Cracking your skull on a knob of Kentucky limestone;

How you slumbered there and finally rose

Shakily among us in an unraveling toga,

Head cocked as if to the unheard summons of a cloud  
Of shivering trumpet vines,

Saint and devil by turns

Of the late-arriving old-fashioned ambulance's re-  
volving eye.

# Picture This

---

by Jenn Monroe

I hear them, my neighbors, through the bathroom  
wall, as horsehair plaster  
won't keep secrets. He says *I love you*, and I wonder,  
does he want her because  
he loves her, or does he love her because she lets him  
enter through her side  
door. She will give just that much of herself, to stretch  
her pale body across  
the dark bright space between them. He asks for a  
picture, to *prove this is*  
*happening*, but only memory can capture warm  
water glowing bioluminescent  
on a clear new moon night, giddy echoes in two  
languages, single cells  
that shimmer at the ends of dark hair, brighten across  
 chests with each breath,  
and, along up-stretched arms, form constellations  
from sea to sky and back.

# Illumination

---

by Greg Hewett

An ancient desire to be led by thread or breadcrumbs  
or stars takes me link by glowing link through  
something like darkness to one person

who may be bullheaded, a witch, a disaster, or unac-  
countable, but neither random nor determined,  
and in reality

of course just traces of someone, an image emerging  
from ether, from four billion virtual hues, each  
with its own precise charge.

Such precision. The image illuminated like every  
other—a profile spun out with filaments of  
words—becoming *a second person*.

I picture you crouched over star-glow of telephone as  
you offer your location up. Me, in the same posi-  
tion, back at you.

I can account for all illumination leading from my  
door to yours—car-light, streetlight, moonlight,  
steeple sheathed in incandescence,

glitter of stained-glass saints backlit, CCTV screens  
in your lobby, caged light bulbs in the hallways,

elevator light droning like a trapped fly, the peephole  
glinting, offering

a hint of labyrinth's end, your interior. Nothing will  
appear beyond the angstrom range of the human  
eye.

Not in a world where the galaxies of deep space are  
just motifs for screen-savers.

## About the authors

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**Gale Acuff** has had poetry published in many literary magazines and has authored three books of poetry, available from Brick House Press. He has taught university English in the US, China, and the Palestinian West Bank.

**Terra Brigando** is currently studying for her MFA in fiction at Mills College and lives in San Francisco. Her previous work has appeared in Arizona State University's *Superstition Review*, *Redlands Review*, *Decomp*, *apt: an online literary magazine*, and *Fogged Clarity*. She loves the color yellow, the sound of words, and grinding her own coffee.

**William Doreski** lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. His latest collection of poetry is *Waiting for the Angel* (2009). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His fiction, essays, poetry, and reviews have appeared in many journals, including *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *The Alembic*, *New England Quarterly*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Philology*, *Antioch Review*, *Natural Bridge*. He won the 2010 Aesthetica Creative Works competition in poetry.

Born in Port-au-Prince, **M.J. Fievre** is an expat whose short stories and poems have appeared in numerous

publications, including *Haiti Noir* (Akashic Books), *The Southeast Review*, *The Caribbean Writer* and *The Mom Egg*. She is the Secretary of Women Writers of Haitian Descent and a regular contributor to the online publication, *The Nervous Breakdown*. She is a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at Florida International University. She loves coconut shrimp, piña coladas, her dog Wiskee, and a good story. Anton Chekhov is one of her favorite writers. Her author website is located at [www.lominy.com](http://www.lominy.com).

**Margaret Finnegan** teaches writing at California State University, Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *LA Times*, *FamilyFun* and other publications. She blogs at <http://margaretfinnegan.blogspot.net> and is very grateful that she has never had to participate in a science fair, although she has been forced to endure them.

Originally from New Mexico, **Kim Henderson** lives with her husband and dog on a mountain in Southern California. There, she writes fiction and teaches creative writing at the Idyllwild Arts Academy. She received her MFA from the University of Montana. She has work forthcoming in the *Newport Review*, where she was a winner in their Bananagrams contest, and *The Southeast Review*, where she was a finalist in the World's Best Short-Short Story Contest. She has published work in *Generations Literary Journal*, *Night Train*, and elsewhere. She is currently at work on a novel.

**Michael Henson** is the author of *Ransack*, a novel described by Leon Driscoll as, "a first novel almost perfect of its kind," and *A Small Room With Trouble on My Mind*, a book of stories. He has also published three collections of poetry: *Crow Call*, *The Tao of*



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**Greg Hewett** is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *darkacre* (Coffee House Press 2010). He has received Fulbright fellowships to Denmark and Norway and is currently Associate Professor of English at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota.

**Yaul Perez-Stable Husni** is an aspiring poet living in San Francisco. He is fluent in both Spanish and English. He has been published previously in *Motif: Writing by Ear*, *The Nashville Review*, *Two-Bit Magazine*, *A Celebration of Poets*, *Chamber Four*, and the *San Francisco Writer's Conference Anthology*.

**Katelyn Kiley** is an MFA student at Virginia Commonwealth University. She earned her MA, in English with a specialization in American Poetry since 1865, and her BA from the University of Virginia. She works on the staff of *Blackbird*, an online journal of literature and the arts.

**Ron Koppelberger** began writing when he was ten years old, when his grandparents gave him his first typewriter. He has written 100 books of poetry and 17 novels over the past four or five years. He has published 406 poems, 231 short stories and 59 pieces of art in over 107 periodicals, anthologies and books. He loves to write and nothing thrills him more than seeing his work in print. The creative process is a thrill for him as is influencing the reader in a positive way, in a thought-provoking way. One of his primary goals involves touching the reader and giving them a gift, the gift of a long forgotten

memory or perhaps a special insight that may not have been apparent.

**Daniel Lawless** teaches writing, film, and humanities at St. Petersburg College, in Florida. He has published poems recently in *The Louisville Review*, *Iron City Review*, *White Mule*, *Les Cahiers du Lez*, *Poems Niederngasse*, *SNL Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Nano*, and other journals and reviews. He can be reached at [lawlessd@spcollege.edu](mailto:lawlessd@spcollege.edu).

**Marc Levy** served as an infantry medic with the First Cavalry Division in Vietnam and Cambodia in 1970. His war related prose and poetry have been published in various online and print journals. He can be reached at [silverspartan@gmail.com](mailto:silverspartan@gmail.com).

**Jenn Monroe** strives to be a poet of love in all its forms. She enjoys guiding students at Chester College of New England on their own journeys through writing. Her work is forthcoming in *Sakura Review*, and the poem that appears in this issue of *C4* recently tied for second place in the Borges Prose and Poetry contest sponsored by *Caper Literary Journal*. She lives, writes, and loves in New Hampshire.

**Anne Leigh Parrish's** short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Pinch*, *Eclectica Magazine*, *Storyglossia*, *Knee-Jerk Magazine*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *PANK*, and *Bluestem*, among other publications. Her story collection, *All The Roads That Lead From Home*, which includes the piece published in *C4*, will be released next year from Press 53. Visit her website at [www.anneleighparrish.com](http://www.anneleighparrish.com).

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**Shannon C. Walsh** is a poet living in Providence, RI. Her poems and prose can be found at *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, *ZolandPoetry.com*, *Soundings East* (as the featured poet), and the *Chamber Four* blog. She has just completed a chapbook manuscript called *How to Break Up*.

# About the publisher

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